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**Paying attention to throwaway conversation: a strategic ethnographic enquiry into how neoliberal governance secures teacher compliance.**

Peter Bannister

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctorate in Education in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, School of Education, June 2019.

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## Abstract

In this thesis, the author sets out to identify and explore the techniques and effects of power by which teacher resistance is reduced towards the performance of a neoliberal professional identity in the English state-funded secondary school. The author reviews the current literature to establish how the logic of the markets has become the accepted organising principle in secondary education before putting poststructuralism to work in order to trouble it. Firstly, drawing on Foucaultian theory, he makes the case that teacher gossip, as conduit for subjugated knowledge, opens the teacher-researcher to more robust insights into teacher identity work than is possible via more traditional means. Secondly, he claims that storying is an effective strategy to explore individuals' deployment of gossip in relation to the spatial and discursive conditions that enable, constrain and/or provoke it; to this end he argues that a story is able to usefully house the contradictory thoughts and feelings of the research-participants, whilst simultaneously addressing potential ethical concerns through the application of fictionalisation devices. Finally, in an experiment that looks to demonstrate the affordance claims he has made, the author experiments with storying the gossip-data he has collected; the stories serve as an active enquiry into how the dominant neoliberal discourse circumscribes what is and what is not "sayable" in the English secondary school, interrogating aspects of the institutional culture that creates the conditions for gossip, as a site of resistance, to emerge in the first place. In the conclusion, the author suggests potential measures that teachers might take to counter the impact that the techniques and effects of power identified have on their professional subject formation.

To my wife, Jenny, who has had to live and breathe this thesis.  
I'm sorry and I love you.

And to my son, Frank, whose arrival coincided (or rather collided!) with my research.  
You are a beautiful reminder of the responsibility I have as a teacher to encourage  
criticality in the classroom, especially in these turbulent “post-truth” times.

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I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: ..... (PETER W. BANNISTER)    DATE: .....

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# **Paying attention to throwaway conversation: a strategic ethnographic enquiry into how neoliberal governance secures teacher compliance.**

*We must make allowance for the complex and unstable powers whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (Foucault, 1981: 101).*

## **1 Introduction**

### ***1.1 Background to the research***

#### ***1.1.1 What has my professional-self become?***

An Inspirational Speaker was invited to talk to teaching staff at an in-service training (INSET) event I was required to attend. No longer a teacher, the invited speaker had become a consultant for an academy trust, responsible for the teaching and learning policies in a large number of schools.

Staff from five local schools from the South West of England sat in the newly built “conference facility” at the academy: a school hall the size of an aircraft hangar, adorned with the latest in visual/audio technology (apparently the money it cost to build it would be made back quite quickly through external lettings).

In between asking rhetorical questions to lend his presentation gravitas, the speaker offered a portrait of what a good teacher should be. He used a sporting analogy: we were told that in order to maintain successful performance like the All Blacks New Zealand rugby team, teachers needed to constantly challenge themselves to make marginal gains. The talk began with a YouTube clip of the All Blacks performing their

interpretation of a traditional Haka in a demonstration of their strength and team prowess to unsettle the opposing team.

The speaker went on to announce proudly that he had given up reading education research as he found it uninspiring. He proceeded to share with us what he had learnt from reading the biographies of his sporting heroes, a good many pop-psychology “how to be successful in business” books, and the other celebrity teacher-bloggers he followed.

Slide after slide of the PowerPoint presentation flew in, each adorned with a stirring quote from one of the books or blogs, related to the importance of seeking to improve performance through marginal gains. Each quote was accompanied by a picture of the author, the majority of whom were white, bearded, middle-aged men. Think the popular image of the Christian God in the Western world...

The speaker proceeded to offer the teacher audience a party bag of pedagogic tricks that we were supposed to take away to deploy in our classrooms to ‘raise the bar’ (cue a picture of a high jump champion) of our practice towards success. We were taken through a series of shallow memorisation and recall exercises to execute in the classroom that promised the teacher-as-technician success within and according to the values of the education marketplace.

What was not offered at any point during the talk was a definition of success. And that’s because success as a teacher in secondary education appeared to be a taken-for-granted: that is, the fulfilment of the current institutional aim to maintain examination results and keep the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) at bay.

As the presentation continued, the Speaker became noticeably perturbed at the audience’s lack-lustre response. He shuffled from one foot to the other when no one

reacted to what were intended as motivational lightning bolts. To (over)compensate he took his effusive delivery up a notch: in an attempt to assert his authority and own-the-space he broke away from the podium and began striding to and fro in front of us; he cracked jokes with the front row and found excuses to place his hand on a shoulder or two; once or twice he went as far as to punch the air passionately.

*After all, he must have thought, what sort of cynical educators do not want to see their students succeed?*

Perhaps it did not cross the speaker's mind that the reason the response to his rally cry was lukewarm was because the institutional definition of success in the state secondary education sector, and the teacher identity it is necessary to adopt in order to achieve this version of success, did not sit comfortably with the teachers in front of him. Indeed, based on the reaction of the assembled audience, I would dare to go further: for some teachers present that day, the professional development mirror the speaker held up to them reflected an image of their professional-self that, not only did they struggle to recognise, but they regarded as abhorrent.

‘Which of the ideas I’ve offered you here are you going to try out in your classroom?’ he asked the audience towards the end of his talk. ‘And I don’t mean once, or twice, I mean over and over, so as to embed them in your practice to achieve those marginal gains...?’

Nodding his head all the while, the Speaker's eyes flitted from one audience member to the next. Seemingly convinced that the uniqueness of his thinking had prompted us to have some sort of epiphany, a self-satisfied smile touched his lips. After an excruciatingly long dramatic pause, he concluded that if we refused to change, and were therefore ‘content to remain’ in our ‘comfort zones’, we would not win our school the equivalent of the rugby world cup.

I turned to the music teacher sat next to me, who'd tutted and sighed his way through the presentation. 'What's up with you?' I asked.

He explained that he found the speaker's assumption that he did not already reflect on his practice insulting. 'You know what would really help me...' he whispered, 'more planning time! I could have used today to mark my Year 10 composition pieces.'

I nodded in agreement.

The Head of Psychology, sitting to my other side, leaned over to join our covert conversation.

'It's clear to me from this talk that the marginal gain I require to succeed is a penis,' she quipped.

Beyond our stifled laughter, the final slide of the PowerPoint had appeared: a professional photographic portrait of the speaker Himself, below which were the details of his twitter account.

The Assistant Head Teacher whose school was hosting the INSET day nimbly covered the lack of applause by asking if any of the teaching-staff in the audience had any questions.

In retrospect, I regard what happened next as the strangest aspect of the INSET day:

Nothing.

Nothing happened next.

'Really? No questions at all?' the Assistant Head Teacher persisted.

Despite members of the audience disagreeing fundamentally with the model of teacher identity being pedalled - myself included - nobody said a thing. We'd sat and listened for over an hour whilst our professional identity was reduced, according to a

competitive logic that mirrored the private sector, to the role of a service provider within the education economy. We were expected to engage, gratefully, with a narrow conception of teacher identity that ignored our lived experience and creative intelligence towards a “one best way” practice. And yet we remained silent. And we remained silent as we filed out towards our reward of an anaemic cup of tea and a slice of cardiac-challenging tray bake.

Only afterwards, in the relative safety of the atrium-cum-dining hall, did teachers openly voice their concerns about the experience. From amongst the hub-bub, I overheard the Head of Languages explain to a group gathered by the hot water urn that, rather than the school spending money on what amounted to an expensive pep talk from management towards management’s goals, she’d have preferred it if the money had been spent on the new set of text books her department required in order to teach the revised General Certificate in Education (GCSE) specification. I overheard another teacher suggest that the only reason the Speaker was invited in at all was so that the Deputy Head Teacher could boast he’d organised a dynamic ‘T&L’ (Teaching and Learning) focused INSET day in an upcoming Headship interview.

Our criticisms towards the model of teacher identity presented to us that day made it no further than cynical whispers shared amongst trusted colleagues.

### *1.1.2 A quietening of critical teacher voice*

The incident I have described above in the form of a narrative vignette was the symbolic beginnings of this thesis. It represents a step towards admitting to a difficult question I have repeatedly asked myself in response to the INSET training I receive and the appraisals of my practice I undergo as a secondary school teacher in the South West of England: how have I become an agent of a market-based ideology in secondary

education despite my strongly felt ethical reservations towards it?

I am embarrassed to admit I make uncomfortable pedagogic compromises in my teaching practice that have me knowingly caught up in the performance of social relations within the state secondary school<sup>1</sup> that lead to the perpetuation of social injustice. I find myself performing a teacher identity that is complicit in perpetuating market forces in education by positioning students in competition with one to ‘extract advantage’ (Connell, 2013: 106) through examination success: deprioritising understanding and ownership of knowledge to drill students in the “facts” they will need to regurgitate if they are to secure examination success. I recognise this emphasis on the teacher as technician (Giroux, 1988) as a key aspect of a neoliberal teacher identity. I use ‘neoliberal’ here and throughout this thesis to refer to the marketisation of education (Connell, 2013; McGregor, 2008) that has occurred in England since the late 1970s onwards (Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Hall & Gunter, 2016; Robertson, 2000); a broad shift in organisational principles in secondary education that I map in my Literature Review in relation to the teacher identity it seeks to produce through operations of power (a process Canaan (2013) refers to as the ‘neoliberalising’ of the subject).

I know I am not alone in feeling uncomfortable about performing as an agent of a system I simultaneously resist. However, other than the odd throwaway comment or whispered anecdote, my colleagues and I seem reluctant to admit our concerns with regards to the current cultural climate in secondary state education and how we are implicated in its maintenance. Teachers’ ability to resist the teacher identity that the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to comprehensive secondary schools and academies that rely on state funding as ‘state schools’ throughout this thesis, with one caveat: I refer to state funded selective schools (for example grammar schools or faith schools) separately and make this clear in the text. All fee-paying secondary schools, including those that function as non-profit and/or are of charitable status, I refer to as ‘private’.

dominant neoliberal discourse in education would have them perform appears to have been significantly reduced. I draw on Foucault's (1989: 162) conception of discourse here to refer to what can and cannot be said according to techniques and effects of power that produce and are produced by a prevailing "truth" (or episteme); "said", that is, in the broadest sense of a communicative exchange, including for example: "thought", "felt", "written", and "enacted". As Weedon (1987: 108) puts it, discourses can be recognised as:

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them<sup>2</sup>

This enquiry, then, stems from an ethical imperative to identify for the purposes of resistance how the neoliberal project in education so successfully influences the constitution of state secondary school teachers' professional identity in England.

## ***1.2 Research aims and questions***

The literature addressing the neoliberal project in education concentrates principally on ideological exposure. There are few examples of how and why teachers concede to perform as neoliberal subjects at the level of the subject and the processes through which neoliberalism has been internalised (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Hall & McGinity, 2015). The object of this thesis, therefore, is to explore how the compliance of

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<sup>2</sup> I go on to describe the impact that the broader neoliberal discourse has had in relation to secondary school sector in England as the 'neoliberal project in education'.

secondary school teachers in England is secured at a local level, particularly in those who are resistant to the neoliberal teacher identity they are expected to perform. It is (post)critical in its attempt to understand how the dominant neoliberal discourse in education has shaped meaning systems that have become accepted as the “truth”; in particular, how teachers have come to define and organise their professional selves in response to this “truth”. It is my hope that, with a more developed understanding of how, through relations of power, they are involved in self-regulation towards the maintenance of the neoliberal project in education, teachers might be able to better subvert or evade them. I explore the metaphysical assumptions and implications of adopting a (post)critical approach to enquiry in more depth at the beginning of my Methodology chapter.

### *1.2.1 Research Aims*

My research aims might be usefully summarised in the following way:

- 1) To raise awareness of how secondary school teachers are produced through local techniques and effects of power as subjects of the neoliberal project in education;
- 2) To contribute to a counterproject to destabilise the “truth” of the neoliberal project in education and the egalitarian intentions it professes.

### *1.2.2 Research questions*

The specific research questions that guide me in this enquiry might be articulated thus:

- 1) By what techniques and effects of power is teacher resistance towards the neoliberal model of teacher identity ‘muted’ (Hall & McGinity, 2015) and therefore compliance secured?
- 2) And how, as an educational researcher, might I usefully gain access to them?



This second, epistemological question, began to take prominence as my research progressed. What I did not fully grasp to begin with was how historic notions of qualitative data collection and (re)presentation were *implicated* in the muting of teacher voice towards the achievement of an unchallenged neoliberal definition of professional identity (Atkinson and Rosiek, 2009; Stern, 2012). This being the case, a critical interrogation of accepted qualitative methods of listening to, recording, and interpreting teacher voice, in relation to the maintenance of the dominant discourse, needed to be included in my Literature Review. Grappling with the methodological implications of the enquiry in this way contributed significantly to new understandings of why some teachers appear to accept and perform a professional identity that they simultaneously resist.

### *1.2.3 A sociocultural perspective of teacher identity*

Discussing to what extent teachers hold agency with regards to the constitution of their professional-selves assumes a sociocultural perspective of identity. As opposed to behaviourist conceptions, which assume a human subject is entirely at the mercy of external social forces, I agree with Archer (2000) that identity derives from the pattern of our cares and concerns, and that as individuals we are actively involved in the continual process of prioritising these based on our experiences. This conception of identity suggests that there is an inner self that deliberates on contending values and beliefs before committing to action (Hall, 1997). It follows that secondary school teachers are locked in a constant working out - or recalibration - of their professional-self through adherence to and/or resistance towards the normative teacher identity that is promoted and maintained by the institution where they work (Beijaard et al, 2004; Gee, 2001; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Olsen (2008: 139) neatly summarises this

sociocultural perspective of teacher identity as a process:

I view identity as a label, really, for the collection of influences and effects from immediate contexts, prior constructs of self [and] social positioning... that become intertwined inside the flow of activity as a teacher simultaneously reacts to and negotiates given contexts and human relationships at given moments.

The language used in the literature to describe the shared perspective that teacher identity is “in process” varies. For example, Olsen (2008) refers to identity in ‘development’, whereas Sfard and Prusak (2005) talk about identity ‘making’. Following on from Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) I use the term ‘shaping’ throughout this thesis, acknowledging the dynamic relationship between the self and external forces in the process of identity formation. I use the term ‘teacher identity’ to refer to teachers’ enactment - through what they say and do - of their professional-self. To put it another way, I regard a teacher’s identity as the professional-self they “choose” to wear subsequent to internal deliberation. The extent to which this choice is related to - or serves as a function of - the neoliberal project in education is the focus of the enquiry.

As I have done here, when I use the term ‘self’ I look to qualify it with either ‘personal’ or ‘professional’. I do not mean this as a reductive binarism, but rather a useful linguistic differential; a place from which to begin to navigate the numerous personal and professional selves that I recognise to simultaneously exist, develop, and overlap in the production of the individual teacher-subject.

### ***1.3 Chapter overview***

Theoretical enquiry and fieldwork were undertaken simultaneously and informed one another in dialogic relationship throughout the writing of this thesis. In order to offer a logical sense of the understandings that have emerged as a result of this enquiry however, I have presented the thesis in four broad sections:

- 1) Establishing the site of enquiry;
- 2) An explanation of my approach to methodological design;
- 3) The (re)presentation and analysis of data;
- 4) Drawing together the implications of the enquiry.

I now offer a brief overview of how individual chapters relate to this schema.

In Chapter 2, the Literature Review, I set out to establish the site of my enquiry. I begin by exploring the historical emergence of the current neoliberal discourse in secondary education and the ‘reductive template’ (MacLure, 1993: 312) of teacher identity it proposes in the name of comparability<sup>3</sup>. I go on to identify a gap in the literature. Whilst there is a considerable body of research that concentrates principally on ideological exposure (Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Hall & Gunter, 2016; Hursh, 2005; Peters 2012), surprisingly few studies have been conducted into how compliance is secured at a local level (a point also raised by Davies & Bansel, 2007; and Hall & McGinity, 2015). The local critical accounts that do exist tend to report on how specific neoliberal demands on the performance of a teacher’s professional-self might be overcome. I suggest that, contrary to such humanist ‘victory’ (Pillow, 2003) narratives, what is required to understand the how and why of teacher compliance, are enquiries

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<sup>3</sup> Reviewing how the teacher-subject is structurally related to the historical period in which it has arisen through the interplay of power and knowledge in this way is what Foucault (1977: 150) (following Nietzsche, 2013) refers to as creating a ‘genealogy’.

that investigate teachers' failures to successfully negotiate - or resist - the neoliberal professional identity expected of them.

In Chapter 3, I explain and justify my methodological approach. I begin by identifying and positioning my enquiry philosophically. I discuss how the enquiry can be recognised as (post)critical in relation to its refusal to accept the current culture in English secondary schools as taken-for-granted. I move on to explain how I propose to put poststructuralism to work to disrupt the "truth" of the neoliberal project in education (Lather, 2009; Mazzei, 2009) by revealing its more insidious operations of power, both on and through the teacher-subject, the consequences of which belie the project's professed democratic aims. I argue that accessing the site of teachers' subjective struggle could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the techniques and effects of power through which the dominant discourse secures their compliance. Drawing on Foucault's (1980b) thinking, I go on to theorise covert "throwaway" conversation between colleagues as a potentially valuable source of strategic ethnographic data that might grant this access. In particular, I suggest it is a creative, playful space (Bruner, 1983) in the margins of official discourse where teachers can discuss their personal views with regards to teacher practice norms more openly, including the ethical frustrations and compromises they and others have experienced as a consequence of failing to resist the dominant neoliberal conception of teacher identity.

I propose storying the data is apt to explore individual participant's deployment of covert conversation in relation to the spatial and discursive conditions that enable, constrain and/or provoke it. Beyond the anonymity it can offer research-participants through the use of fictionalisation devices, I argue the liminal qualities of a story are able to house the contradictions and ambiguity that the negotiation of multiple subjectivities - through the performance of covert rhetorical practice - creates. I argue

for these benefits with reference to the broader arguments for the employment of storying in social science research offered by Bell (2002), Leavy (2015), Speedy (2008), and Van Maanen (2011); and, in the context of educational research more specifically, Clough (2002), Reed (2012), and Sikes (2005).

Further to this, I suggest that expressive literary devices can be employed in a story to capture and communicate emotion in a more complex rendering of the social. Afterall, and as Zembylas (2003) points out, teacher identity cannot be performed independently of emotion because the values underpinning identity positions are felt as well as thought:

[The] constant construction, destruction, and repair of boundaries around the constitution of the self is fraught with emotion. Emotions (as well as thoughts and actions) are part of the very fabric constituting the self (108).

With the aim being to grasp the conditions that make teacher gossip possible within the institutional rules that define the limits of what is and what is not “sayable” (Foucault, 1991: 59), in Chapter 4 I go on to experiment with storying the gossip-data I have collected in the field. As covert conversation “writ-large” the two stories function as a critique of the techniques and effects of power that enable and/or provoke their emergence.

In Chapter 5, through an analysis of the storied accounts, akin to the critical interpretation of literature, justified by Hytten (2004) and Mayo (2000) in the context of ethnographic sociological research, and Sikes (2005) in the context of educational research, I identify techniques and effects of power by which the neoliberal project in education seeks to produce and position teachers as subjects. This represents a reasoned

extrapolation and extension of key themes that the two stories address. It is not meant as a reductionist retelling of the stories, but rather an attempt to put the stories to work in the context of the wider sociological literature.

Finally, I attempt to draw together the implications of the enquiry in Chapter 6. I argue that in order to successfully contribute to a critical counterproject, individual teachers will need to take more responsibility for their own power effects by seeking to problematise their situatedness. I offer some tentative suggestions with regards to how this might be achieved.

## **2 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Introduction***

The topic I am exploring is the ‘neoliberalising’ (Canaan, 2013) of teachers in state secondary education in England; more specifically, how compliance is secured in teachers resistant to the neoliberal teacher identity they are expected to perform. I first set out to establish the site of my enquiry. Through my engagement with the literature, I identify and define the neoliberal professional identity that teachers in England are expected to perform by tracing its historical emergence and how it has established the “truth” of itself. This involves investigating the hegemonic rise of neoliberalism in the discursive West more broadly before moving on to review critical analyses of neoliberalism’s tightening grip on education in England from the 1980s to the present day.

Whilst numerous critical studies focus on the broader ideological exposure of the neoliberal project in education and its damaging social impact, few enquiries exist into how teacher compliance is secured through techniques and effects of power on a local level (Davies and Bansel 2007; Hall and McGinity 2015). Therefore, in the second half of the Literature Review I turn my attention to why this might be the case. I draw on poststructural scholarship to explore how, through the unproblematised use of teacher voice in the representation of teacher resistance, qualitative teacher identity research is often rooted within - and therefore sustains - the neoliberal project in education despite critical intentions (Atkinson and Rosiek, 2009; Pillow 2003); as Lather (2009) posits, qualitative research has been disciplined via standards as a part of neoliberal governance. These understandings inform my methodological design in the subsequent chapter, where I consider how to (re)present for analysis a less mediated teacher voice in education research.

## 2.2 *The hegemonic rise of neoliberalism*

In order to chart the impact neoliberalism has had on state education in England, I first look to establish a working definition of the key terms associated with the paradigm<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, this opening section of my Literature Review focuses on the conditions that facilitated the broad shift of social and economic policies in England from a Keynesian welfare state to a neoliberal state.

Harvey (2007a), whose detailed study of the neoliberal ‘turn’ can be recognised as a key text in both its breadth and scope, explains how following the Second World War there was a concerted effort amongst the developed nation-states in the West to prevent a return to the conditions that created the Great Depression of the 1930s. There was also an urgent need to develop shared political goals to avoid future conflicts between nation-states. A new liberal world-order, realised through institutions including the United Nations, and the World Bank was created in response to these concerns. John Maynard Keynes led the British delegation at the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference where this order was established. His influential book, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936/2017), published a decade earlier at the height of the Great Depression, advocated for an interventionist politics to provide economic stability. As Steger and Roy (2010: 9) explain:

Keynesian ideas proved to be crucial in the development of the theoretical framework of ‘macroeconomics’. This new field proclaimed that it was possible for national governments to aggregate data and predict economic crises in

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<sup>4</sup> Boas and Gans-Morse (2009) lament critical social science research that invokes neoliberalism without a working definition. They caution critical researchers not to assume implicit understanding as neoliberalism is a contested concept.



advance of their occurrence, thus proposing the use of various policies to intervene in and make adjustments to the economy.

The first two decades following the Second World War and the Bretton Woods conference were marked by extraordinary economic growth in the West that has since been recognised as a 'golden age of controlled capitalism' by some economists (Reich, 2008: 17).

The priority for an England recovering from the Second World War became citizen welfare. The Keynesian fiscal and monetary policies that were adopted had full employment as their key objective. An increase in social services and rising wages provided workers with the opportunity for social mobility. By the 1970s, however, capital accumulation began to stagnate. Businesses in England, in a bid to remain competitive in the new world economy, were reluctant to pass the rising cost of workers' wages on to consumers (Hursh, 2005: 4). Inflation had also increased significantly as a result of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) restricting oil output:

The prosperity of the postwar period was founded to such a degree on oil that when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries decided in 1973 to restrict output, the consequent fivefold increase in the price of this one commodity increased inflation throughout every developed economy' (Prasad, 2006: 2).

This combination of stagnation and inflation threatened an economic downturn. There were two solutions proffered: those who wished to re-establish market freedoms (a self-

regulating market) and those who called for further state intervention. As Evans (2013) explains, Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government, having brought a vote of no confidence in James Callaghan's Labour government and won, were elected to power in 1979 with a mandate to achieve the former. Her promises of lower taxation as a result of market freedoms proved popular with the electorate.

There was another reason for Thatcher's success at the ballot box that year. The post-war period had also seen a rise in social activism on the part of ethnic minorities, women and workers who struggled to extend their rights. Social activism had successfully secured, for example, the right to safe working conditions, the right to education, the right to healthcare, and the right to vote (Bowles & Gintis, 1986: 57-59). There was a growing concern, however, that social activism had become too militant, leading to the radicalization of previously passive peoples (Davies & Bansel, 2007: 17). This could be applied to the reach of the trade unions, who had organised an increasing number of strikes in the 1970s. The strike that took place during the winter preceding the 1979 election (popularly referred to as the "Winter of Discontent") had a particularly far reaching impact; with many of the country's unions joining forces to strike over government plans to limit pay rises due to inflation, the country's infrastructure ground to a halt (Evans, 2013: 15). Consequently, Thatcher's pledge to diminish the power of the unions to keep the country running and allow industry to compete unhindered also proved popular (Harvey, 2007a: 23)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The weakening of education unions can be seen to contribute to teachers' inability to resist an increasingly prescriptive model of neoliberal teacher identity which I will explore in relation to the literature presently.

Thatcher's implementation of such policies once in power marked a definite shift towards what is now recognised as the neoliberal paradigm, which Harvey (2007a: 64) defines as:

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve the institutional framework appropriate to such practices<sup>6</sup>.

Somewhat ironically, a large proportion of the electorate in England with a vested financial or social interest in neoliberal policy were the beneficiaries of the welfare distribution and progressive tax policies in the Keynesian model which they went on to reject at the ballot box in 1979. The social mobility achieved in the post-war period as a result of these policies had created a new, burgeoning middle class who sought to protect their privilege. As Prasad (2006: 3) argues:

The catalyst for Thatcher's neoliberal reforms was the strength of labor: the unions displayed their muscle repeatedly over the course of the 1970s, bringing government after government down through strikes. But because the socioeconomic transformation of the postwar period had moved most voters out of the working class, the unions succeeded in alienating voters and radicalizing the Conservative party.

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<sup>6</sup> It was a shift mirrored in President Reagan's policies in the United States of America (USA) after his election in 1980 (Davies, 2016; Harvey, 2007).

During the 1980s Margaret Thatcher set about overturning the UK's fiscal and social policies through a systematic withdrawal of the state from social provision. State industries such as British Petroleum, British Steel and British Rail were sold - often at discounted prices - to private companies on the assumption that marketplace competition would provide the impetus to invest and improve their manufacturing methods and facilities (Steger & Roy, 2010)<sup>7</sup>.

True to her word, Thatcher drastically diminished the power of the labour unions through her Party's privatisation drive. '[R]educed to a domain for exercising entrepreneurship' (Brown, 2003: 38), any form of social unity or solidarity was conceived of as opposing the individual's right to freedom; moreover, any claims to social justice were painted as absurd and obstructive attempts at political correctness (Newfield, 2008). Margaret Thatcher summarised this conceptual standpoint in an interview following her third election win in 1987, declaring: '[t]here's no such thing as a society'<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The policies of the European Commission could be recognised as serving to redress the balance between entrepreneurialism and regulation to an extent. However, I am writing this thesis after the decision was made for Britain to leave the European Union (our government is currently embroiled in what has become popularly referred to as "Brexit" negotiations). It has yet to be seen whether Britain as a single nation state, without the backing of our European partners, is able to hold its own in negotiations with large multinational corporations to the benefit of British citizens (for an interesting discussion about why the communities in the UK that would least benefit from leaving the EU voted to leave, and how their decision relates to neoliberal modes of thinking see Davies (2016)).

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Thatcher said this in an interview for 'Woman's Own' conducted by Douglas Keay in 1987 after her third consecutive election win. A full transcription of the interview can be found at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>

The neoliberal discourse can therefore be recognised, first and foremost, as a political ideology. This has important implications for educational inquiries into the accepted norms of teacher identity because it necessitates examining these norms from a political stance (Scotland, 2012). In other words, if institutional arrangements in state secondary schools require a particular teacher identity to be enacted, this identity needs to be explored in relation to whose interests it serves (Kincheloe & McLaren 2002: 124). I return to discuss this point in more depth in relation to the philosophical positioning of my enquiry at the beginning of my Methodology chapter.

### ***2.3 Dismantling education as part of the wider neoliberal project to increase profits***

I now turn my attention to an exploration of the historical emergence and tightening grip of the neoliberal project at work in secondary education in England. I use the term ‘neoliberal project in education’ to denote a logic of competition - similar to that which led to the privatisation of industry discussed previously - at work in the organisation of institutional arrangements in secondary education in England, towards the creation of an education marketplace.

Firstly, I consider the arguments put forward by the proponents of a market-based ideology in education. Specifically, why they believe competition, as an organising principle, can make schools more equitable, diverse and efficient institutions through competition (Hursh, 2005; Kumar & Hill, 2012; Robertson 2000). Drawing on the work of critical education theorists, I go on to question to what extent key education reforms, born of this market-based ideology, have achieved said egalitarian aims.

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### *2.3.1 The argument for privatising education*

Robertson (2000: 174) notes that the introduction of competition in education has largely been shaped by ‘the criticism of schools as inefficient bureaucracies that are unresponsive either to community or individual interests’. She goes on to suggest that proponents of a market-based ideology in education argue, much like the proponents of privatising state-industry, that competition provides schools and teachers with an impetus to improve. This argument assumes that if parents and carers are given powers to select their education provider, schools will be incentivised to invest in resources to improve their educational offer to attract custom. Moreover, proponents of a market-based ideology suggest that devolving centralised state powers to individual schools (or clusters of schools), to facilitate them in fashioning a competitive offer unique from others, will lead to a reduction in the unnecessary bureaucracy created by intermediaries such as Local Education Authorities (LEA), whilst simultaneously freeing schools to design curricula better tailored to the needs of students (Hursh, 2005). In short, the argument for the ongoing neoliberal project in English secondary schools is an egalitarian one: by creating a climate of competition through choice, schools can become more equitable, diverse and efficient institutions (Kumar & Hill, 2012). As Peters (2012: 135) wryly surmises: in education ‘privatisation is suggested as a universal panacea to problems of funding and quality’.

### *2.3.2 The critical response to the neoliberal project in education*

The “pure” logic of the markets is not easily applied to the “messiness” of the social, however. Critical education scholars’ analyses of the effectiveness of key policy decisions towards the achievement of the egalitarian promises the neoliberal project in education makes suggest that it has failed in England (and continues to do so). Indeed

many of the policy decisions supporting and maintaining it have served to increase the bureaucratic burden on schools and entrench the social inequality the neoliberal project in education professes to address (Ball, 2011; Connell, 2013; Broadfoot, 2001; Hursh, 2005; Kumar & Hill, 2012).

#### 2.3.2.1 Decentralisation policies that have led to fragmentation

There has been increasing fragmentation of secondary educational provision in England. Since the 1980s, the state education sector in England has been subject to a raft of government initiatives that have had as their goal institutional autonomy and self-management<sup>9</sup>. Open enrolment policies (1980 Education Act & 1988 Education Reform Act) have sought to introduce competition into the state education sector. Further to this, policies such as the Specialist Schools initiative (1993 Education Act), which encouraged schools to apply to be recognised as specialists in delivering a particular subject discipline (and receive increased funding as a result), sought to diversify provision from which parents could choose. More recently, these two aims have conjoined under the academy programme, which began its life under Tony Blair's New Labour Government in 2000 as a targeted policy to raise standards by replacing failing schools in local authorities who were recognised to be struggling. This programme has been extensively rolled out to the rest of the country by way of financial incentives by subsequent Conservative governments, predominantly under prime minister David Cameron and his education secretary Michael Gove. In the 2016 Budget, Chancellor

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<sup>9</sup> See Whitty (2000) for an overview of education reforms that took place during the 1980s and 1990s in the England under the Thatcher and Major governments, and also the 'third way' proposed by Blair's subsequent New Labour Government which he goes on to argue represented much of the same.

George Osborne announced a forced academisation plan, under which all schools in England would either need to convert to academies by 2020 or be committed to converting by 2022. In light of fierce criticism from teaching unions, the plans have been temporarily put on hold, however.

Successive governments have argued that schools who become self-managing academies have increased freedom to innovate, however the parameters of autonomy have led to a narrowing of the curriculum. The decrease in state intervention has led to an increase in state regulation in the name of comparability, undermining the democratic values the privatisation of schools appears to promote (Ball, 2011; Hursh, 2005). In the name of comparability schools/academies, reconceptualised as service providers in the education market, are required to teach a curriculum that is significantly reduced so as to be measurable. The neoliberal project in education therefore demands an increase in standardised testing. Such Standardised tests were initially introduced as part of the Education Reform Act of 1988; they measured ‘the performance of pupils at the end of four Key Stages, but also to make it possible for market forces to operate by providing a currency of information which would fuel competition between schools’ (Broadfoot, 2001: 142). School knowledge became nationally prescribed in the form of a national curriculum in order to hold devolved schools accountable through comparison. The GCSE exam for sixteen-year olds was also introduced by the act in order to provide comparison data. More recently, Theresa’s May’s Conservative government called for all GCSE courses to minimise coursework content in favour of terminal written examinations. Connell (2013: 106), somewhat scathingly, points out how this represents a backwards step for pedagogical design and delivery:



Not too long ago, competitive testing itself was in disrepute. Intelligence-testing results that purported to prove IQ was mainly hereditary had been shown to be faked. There was increasing evidence that conventional achievement tests were culturally and socially biased, and that competitive testing was of little practical use in classroom teaching.

Through financial incentivisation schools have been placed under pressure to ‘choose’ decentralisation policies. Such successive ‘choices’ has led to state education being circumscribed by market logic because schools believe they have invited it in as a democratic organising principle. As Davies and Bansel (2007: 249) put it:

... changes have been introduced in the form of choices that individuals and institutions can make in order to secure funding, such that those individuals and groups experience the new forms of governmentality as something they are responsible for.

This decentralisation of education has also led to the emergence of new providers in education service delivery (Kumar & Hill, 2012). As Ball (2016) articulates, this means that the debate has shifted from who will provide state schooling to whether or not they should profit from doing so:

In England the debate is now not who shall provide state schooling, but whether they should be able to profit directly from such provision. Indeed, there are already massive profits being made from indirect service provision, e.g. back-office services, CPD, consultancy, teacher supply, inspection, and policy programme management. In England, charities, philanthropic foundations,

community groups, parent groups, social enterprises and, on a small scale, businesses are now running state schools (1049).

#### 2.3.2.2 The entrenchment of inequality

A common concern highlighted in the critical literature is that, alongside the decentralisation of state education, privately-controlled schooling continues to receive governmental support on the basis that competition can only be a good thing in securing higher standards in the state sector (e.g. Aynsley-Green, 2018; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Greany and Higham, 2018). Recent research conducted by the Sutton Trust (2017) educational charity suggests otherwise. The Trust conducted a survey that reveals that, whilst only 7% of the population in the UK attend independent fee-paying schools, privately educated students dominate the professions of medicine (61% of top doctors), journalism (51% of leading print journalists), politics (50% of the current government), and law (74% of top judges). In light of this, middle class parents are more likely to ‘choose’ private education to achieve and/or maintain advantage, argue Campbell et al. (2009).

Recent policy initiatives such as the expansion of selective grammar schools proposed by Theresa May’s Conservative government also continue to undermine social justice. Students whose parents are in a position to pay for private tutoring to help secure the results required to pass the eleven plus examination, which serves an entrance examination to the local grammar school, have a distinct advantage (Aynsley-Green, 2018).

Gordon and Whitty (1997: 459) summarise the situation thus: ‘within English culture, schools judged to be good and, hence, oversubscribed, are most likely to be academically selective schools with socially advantaged intakes’. They go on to

explain that those parents who cannot afford private education and are not in a county with a grammar school system choose schools that are closest to that academic model. Consequently, ‘those schools that are in a position to choose often seek to identify their success with an emphasis on traditional academic virtues and thus attract those students most likely to display them’ (ibid). In other words, in emulation of the private sector (Clarke & Newman, 1997), schools/academies will tend to offer traditional GCSE and A-level qualifications as opposed to technical or applied qualifications in order to attract students of a particular academic calibre, which, in turn, maintains their standing on national league tables and ensures that they are oversubscribed. An oversubscribed school can exercise more choice over the students they accept on roll. Schools who fail to secure their students higher test scores find it difficult to retain their enrolment and, consequently, must accept any student who applies, including those who are academically less able (Robertson & Lauder, 2001). Each student place is funded and therefore the schools who do not retain enrolment will struggle to provide the same standard of resources and facilities as an oversubscribed school. In this way, with schools decentralised to the extent that they are now self-managing academies, the marketisation of education reproduces and entrenches social division (Tomlinson, 2001: 73).

Greany and Higham (2018), in their extensive report on the current structure of English education, concur. They suggest that the education system in England has become increasingly socially stratified since 2010, with only higher-performing schools benefiting from the reforms to achieve what the government refers to as a ‘self-improving school led system’ (SISS). They conclude that the system as a whole is becoming less equitable in its fragmentation, citing data that highlights how secondary

schools judged as outstanding by Ofsted are, year on year, admitting fewer students eligible for free school meals<sup>10</sup>.

## ***2.4 ‘Economics are the method: the object is to change the soul’<sup>11</sup> - the neoliberal reshaping of the teacher-learner relationship***

What are the implications of the neoliberal project in education on the construction of individual subjects in secondary education in England? In this section I review the literature that addresses how the leaders, teachers and students in schools are incentivised to perform according to the new norms of the dominant neoliberal discourse.

### ***2.4.1 The production of human capital***

A recurrent theme in the literature is how the logic of the markets replicates itself through the education system. According to Connell (2013: 104), neoliberalism understands education as human capital formation: ‘the business of forming the skills and attitudes needed by a productive workforce – productive in the precise sense of producing an ever-growing mass of profits for the market economy’. Because the

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<sup>10</sup> Greany and Higham (2018: 10) discuss how the government’s ‘self-improving school-led system’ (SISS) policy agenda has become ‘an overarching narrative for school policy since 2010.’ The reforms that they suggest are driven by this agenda include the promotion of multi-academy trusts (or MATS), and Teaching School Alliances (or TSAs). The government argues that these reforms are successfully ‘moving control to the frontline’ (DfE, 2016b: 8) to decrease the bureaucratic burden on state schools in England. However, it serves to place an academy in the paradoxical position of supporting another academy with whom they are in competition to “win” students.

<sup>11</sup> This is quote taken from an interview with Margaret Thatcher in the Sunday Times that was conducted to mark the two-year anniversary of her landslide 1979 election victory (Sunday Times, 1981).

primary concern of education has become ensuring students are employable, ‘education becomes less concerned with developing the well-rounded liberally educated person and more concerned with developing the skills required for a person to become an economically productive member of society’ (Hursh, 2005: 5). Heilbronn (2013: 31) agrees with this position, arguing that ‘a policy driven auditing of schools is underpinned with an economic justification, related to gaining skills, qualifications and employment in a global economy.’ The results, Baltodano (2012: 489) argues ‘are the lack of an articulate public and the reduction of public spheres to contest the dominant neoliberal vision of society’.

Giroux (2014) suggests that the market-driven notion of teaching and learning confuses education with training; students do not leave school able to think critically and autonomously so as to be able to contribute to democracy as active citizens, rather success is judged solely on employment prospects and how much money students might potentially earn as a result of their education. Knowledge is therefore regarded as a product, schools as shopping malls, and students as consumers. Education, he goes on to argue, has been stripped of its ‘public values, critical content, and civic responsibilities as part of its broader goal of creating new subjects wedded to the logic of privatization’ (ibid: 86).

The goal of educating students to ask questions and hold power to account, so that they might go on to become a critically minded citizenry able to contribute fully to democratic life, has been displaced by a pervasive market mentality that has led to a narrow, instrumental curriculum.

#### *2.4.2 Knowledge as a commodity*

In the “education marketplace” test scores are the currency by which students are

granted or denied access to undergraduate courses at the more prestigious Higher Education institutions (whose reputations are built on securing their students access to higher paid, higher profile employment in the future). The student-subject is therefore reconfigured as an entrepreneur, in competition with his or her peers to secure employability (Adaman & Mantra, 2013; Ball, 2003). As a consequence, developing the cognitive skills of knowledge retention and recall in order to succeed in terminal examinations has been given precedence in order to provide students with a competitive edge in the wider marketplace.

According to this logic of competition, the process of teaching and learning is purely transactional; students, in their role as consumers of knowledge, expect their teachers, as service providers, to impart the knowledge necessary to pass their exams. The relationship between teaching and learning has been redefined in terms similar to that of financial exchange, 'reduced to an implicit contract between buyer and seller' (Peters, 2012: 135). Knowledge is therefore regarded as a commodity one acquires towards achieving power and privilege. As Connell (2013: 106) concludes:

The education system as a whole comes to stand, not for the common interest and self-knowledge of the society, but for ways to extract private advantage at the expense of others

This echoes McGregor's (2009: 347) concerns, who insists '[i]nstead of facilitating the social 'good' of education, schools have become places that add capital value to youth'.

A recent study conducted by the charity the Prince's Trust (2017) suggests that, in response to this high stakes educational process that relies on extracting privilege

from others, the happiness and wellbeing of young people in the UK has dropped to its lowest level since they began surveying in 2009. According to the research, 48% from a sample of 2215 sixteen to twenty-five-year olds struggled with mental health problems while they were at school or college. With such stark statistics, Aynsley-Green (2018) questions why the stress caused to children by the testing regime has yet to be acknowledged by government<sup>12</sup>.

The relentless focus on individual, material gain puts incredible pressure on young people to achieve a golden set of exam results that they are led to believe will offer them access to a golden wage in order to be the best consumers that they can possibly be. Phillip Pullman (in Flood, 2018), speaking on behalf of a great many authors for children in his role as president of the Society of Authors, is concerned not only with the pressure the testing regime puts children under but how it undermines the nurturing of lifelong learners. He refers disparagingly to Thomas Gradgrind, the school superintendent in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854/2003) who champions teaching 'facts, facts, facts!', suggesting that the approach is a 'recipe for the destruction of the soul'.

#### *2.4.3 Teacher as service provider*

A competitive knowledge economy (McGregor, 2009) has led to a reduced capacity for teachers to act outside of neoliberal subjectivities. Teachers are incentivised to impart

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<sup>12</sup> The current government has recently suggested the introduction of Mindfulness classes to tackle rising levels of student anxiety (DfE, 2019). Mindfulness, in and of itself, can be beneficial to students, as numerous studies suggest (for a comprehensive meta-analysis of studies in this area see Zenner et al, 2009). However, such initiatives are unlikely to reduce the anxiety students experience as a result of the competitive culture in the neoliberal school. It is this competitive culture, and the underlying operations of power that create and sustain it, that will need to be addressed.

knowledge efficiently in a way that will be memorised by students for the purpose of successful recall in terminal examination. Conversely, they are disincentivised to commit time and energy to applying a pedagogy in their classroom that seeks to critically engage students with the knowledge that they are being introduced to. An emphasis on the importance of comparability through competition has therefore rendered the learning process passive through the intimidation of speculation and discovery (Grant, 2007: viii). In the neoliberal school students are taught how to be good consumers rather than good thinkers.

The literature suggests that what drives teachers to comply with this conception of teacher identity includes: a sense of moral purpose to do the best by their students (Heilbronn, 2013); and practical considerations related to the continuance and viability of their teaching career (Ball, 2003; Stevenson & Wood, 2013). In relation to this second point, it is important to note that, under the academy programme in England, national pay agreements have been eschewed and replaced by a school-based negotiation of teacher salaries. This has opened the door to performance-related pay according to market logic (Wrigley et al, 2012). In other words, teacher performance and pay has been causally linked to students' ability to successfully extract power and privilege from their peers as evidenced by terminal examinations (Stern, 2012).

In the education marketplace, teachers are positioned as 'executive technicians' (Winch, 2014), following sanctioned, usable protocols with minimum interpretation that represent 'the one best way' (Burnard & White, 2008: 669) to facilitate students to achieve higher test scores. The curriculum is narrowed, and the way to teach it is increasingly proscribed through 'prepackaged learning materials, imposed curricula, and rigid, micromanaged schemes of work' (Grant, 2007: vii). This amounts to what Giroux (2010: 35) refers to as the 'proletarianization of teacher work'.



This new form of teacher professionalism, which is controlled from outside the teaching profession by commercial logic, is referred to by Evetts (2009) as ‘organizational’ rather than ‘occupational’. This represents what Adama and Madra (2014: 693) describe as a process of ‘depoliticisation through economisation’ on the level of the social subject. The possibility of teachers shaping their professional identity drawing on knowledge generated by their own experiences is significantly reduced. As Atkinson and Rosiek (2009: 175) note:

the attempts to create “teacher proof” curriculum means that teachers are treated as piece workers, as opposed to professional decision makers. The consciousness and creative intelligence of teachers are removed from the pedagogical process.

This conception of teacher knowledge has allowed for its own commodification (Hunt, 2006: 317). Higher-achieving schools (according to their position in the education market)<sup>13</sup>, and freelance educational speakers (who claim to have previously led policy initiatives in high-achieving schools), have been incentivised ‘to codify and sell ‘best practice’ knowledge geared towards the demands of the accountability system’ (Greany & Higham, 2018: 18). Apple (2005) proposes that this new cottage industry in education improvement is evidence of how the neoliberal project in education is not only promoted and sustained by capital or ‘its allies in government’ (19), but by a

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<sup>13</sup> In conjunction with decreased budgets: according to the IFS (2018), the amount of per pupil spending in England's schools has fallen by 8% since 2010.

faction of the professional new middleclass that achieve mobility through the use of technical expertise:

These are people with backgrounds in management and efficiency techniques who provide the technical and ‘professional’ support for accountability, measurement, ‘product control’, and assessment that is required by the proponents of neo-liberal policies of marketisation (ibid: 20)

#### *2.4.4 The neoliberal project in education adapts to endure*

The question remains: how does the neoliberal project endure despite failing to achieve its professed aims of making schools more equitable, diverse and efficient institutions through competition? One answer might be in the project’s ability to adapt to the external circumstances that frustrate it. The neoliberal project in education repeatedly recasts itself in the role of saviour in response to its own failings. Such manoeuvres are recognised by Peck (2010: 23) as ‘remedial flanking mechanisms’ of mutating neoliberal rule. The character of these remedial flanking mechanisms remains ‘incentive-compatible’ (Adama & Madra, 2014: 693), contributing to the neoliberal aims of reorganising the social ‘such that all human behaviour is governed through an interface of [the] economic...’ (ibid: 692).

An example of these ‘flanking mechanisms’ (Peck 2010: 23) at work in education in England is the recent GCSE and A-level overhaul which, under the banner of fairness, place a greater emphasis than ever before on terminal examinations. The new examination arrangements were introduced as a solution to concerns related to the completion of coursework. QCA (2005) reported that students from higher social

classes were more likely to have a home environment conducive to completing coursework to a higher standard.

Another example of how the neoliberal project in education has looked to adapt to endure by intervening to rectify its own failures is the drive for a ‘knowledge rich’ curriculum. This initiative is largely based on Hirsh’s (2007) argument that less privileged students will benefit from being introduced to powerful knowledge, that is knowledge that acts as the taken-for-granted cultural currency of children from more privileged backgrounds (for example the work of key poets, see Young et al, 2014). An argument that, in and of itself is laudable<sup>14</sup>. The government has taken this theory and applied the logic of competition to it; a limited number of schools/academies in England will receive extra funding if they can show their new knowledge rich curriculum is ‘improving student outcomes’ (DfE, 2018) as evidenced by examination results. This further emphasis on the instrumental and measurable, however, only serves to increase competition between students; it intensifies the need to extract privilege which undermines the claims the initiative makes.

As Peck (2010: 23) astutely comments, this neoliberal restructuring resembles ‘not so much a triumphal, forward march as a series of prosaic “forward failures”’.

#### *2.4.5 Evading responsibility without relinquishing control*

Strengthened by the fragmentation that has occurred as a result of decentralisation, the neoliberal project in education is also able to explain away any failures towards achieving its professed democratic goals as mismanagement on a local level (i.e. the flawed design and enactment of policy in schools towards achieving the neoliberal

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<sup>14</sup> For the pamphlet that the Schools Standards Minister refers to as definitively ‘making the case’ (Gibb, 2017) for a ‘knowledge rich’ curriculum, see ASCL (2017).

project in education's unfettered, free market system which could bring about social justice) (Abelmann et al., 2009). This, Kjaer (2004) suggests, marks a shift from government to *governance*; centralised control is being replaced by a series of independent but networked hierarchical models that regulated from a distance (Hudson, 2007; Jessop, 2011). Successive British governments have increased their authority over the education system 'by setting and adapting the conditions in which governance occurs' (Greany and Higham, 2018: 26), whilst professing a neoliberal ideology towards consumer sovereignty. As Peters (2012) points out, the emulation of private sector management in education and social policy under the banner of choice has been 'delegated rather than genuinely devolved, while executive power [has become] concentrated even more at the centre' (135).

This quasi-market model of England's education system, that 'finds a way to intervene at the same time as appearing to eschew interventionism' (Gordon & Whitty, 1997: 455), is a dangerous state of affairs where successive governments are able to wash their hands of the responsibility for failing schools in a broken system of their own making.

An example of how the academisation of schools has created a situation where the government is able to "pick and choose" when to intervene is the recent announcement that teachers, as public sector workers, will be receiving a pay rise. This headline policy is likely to be welcomed by the electorate. What has not been publicised, however, is that the Secretary of State for Education has ignored the STRB (School Teachers Pay Review Board) recommendation and refused to give the suggested 3.5% pay rise to all teachers (STRB, 2018). This is the first time that STRB recommendations have been ignored by government. Further to this, the pay rise that teachers are receiving has not been fully funded by the Department for Education (DfE),

putting fiscal pressure on schools and potentially leaving Head Teachers with impossible budgets. Due to decentralisation, any shortfall in budgets however can be blamed on mismanagement at a local level, and any union action taken in response to financial pressures appears ungrateful in light of what appears to be a benevolent intervention by the government to support teaching staff <sup>15</sup>.

Governors, leadership teams, and teachers are now recognised as being accountable for their school's/academy's fortunes despite increased government regulation brought in under the "heroic" banner of quality assurance. An example of this is how the litany of recent cases of corruption in Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) is blamed on individual maverick leaders rather than on the neoliberal project in education itself (Greany and Higham, 2018), which continues, unabated, to place economic incentives above equity, inclusion and professionalism.

### ***2.5 Limited examples of how and why teachers concede to perform as neoliberal subjects at a local level: exploring a gap in the literature***

In this section I explore, drawing on the relevant literature, how the neoliberal project in education and the teacher identity it assumes has established the "truth" of itself by achieving academic legitimacy through the development of teacher effectiveness research. I focus in particular on how the neoliberal project in education has successfully side-lined critical theory that might otherwise have validated teachers' resistance towards it. In relation to this, I go to consider why the literature contains so

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<sup>15</sup> As a union representative in the school where I teach, I have received an e-mail (which distracted me momentarily from writing this thesis) calling on me to write to my local MP to ask the current Secretary for Education, Damien Hinds, to put pressure on the Chancellor for more money to go into Education. This is a joint campaign with the NAHT (National Union of Head Teachers) and ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders).

few examples of why teachers concede to perform as neoliberal subjects at a local level. This raises issues that will be pertinent to the methodological design of my inquiry into how teacher compliance is secured.

#### *2.5.1 Claiming objectivity in the verification of the “truth” according to the dominant discourse: the teacher effectiveness research movement*

It is important to note that neoliberalism is not explicitly defended in education research, however it can be recognised to inform the arguments for the teacher effectiveness research movement. Teacher effectiveness research identifies and determines the specific procedural techniques (see Sawyer, 2004) that make an ‘effective’ teacher (Gale & Skourdoumbis, 2013: 894) within the neoliberal paradigm. It emphasizes:

... the documentation of professional improvement rather than personal insight; it embodies a notion of how to get from A to B - a process of ‘doing’ rather than of ‘being’ (Hunt, 2006: 317).

This movement has come about in response to the new conception of teacher as service provider explored previously. There is an expectation, Stern (2012) argues, that Higher Education Institutions provide research to inform teacher training and teacher professional development that focuses less on issues of democracy and social justice, but instead looks to provide ‘the management techniques that would magically produce high achievement and test scores’ (391). Such research can be used to justify holding teachers accountable to strict performance criteria at a local level (Burnard & White, 2008). For example, the expectation that lessons are structured in a particular way, or

that student assessment is conducted in a specific mode and at a specific frequency, recorded and evidenced for accountability purposes through the mechanism of a lesson plan and/or lesson observation proforma.

The prescriptive practices teacher effectiveness research promotes through ‘overly scientific approaches to educational scholarship’ (Atkinson and Rosiek, 2009: 177) contributes to the maintenance of the dominant neoliberal discourse in schools, dangerously claiming objectivity in the verification of the “truth” according to that discourse. Emboldening the professional new middleclass that Apple (2005) describes to apply their technical expertise to support accountability.

The “feedback loop” described here, with the “truth” of the neoliberal discourse being performed and endorsed in the field of education towards the maintenance of the project in wider society, amounts to the establishment of what Foucault (1980a) refers to as a ‘regime of truth’. He describes this as the discourse that a society has accepted and *made* its truth:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (131).

A “cart before horse” situation has arisen, where the shape and direction of education research is increasingly being decided by politicians who see the common

sense in and advocate for neoliberal reforms. Increasingly, the DfE is able to exercise control over the Higher Education (HE) sector by offering grants for research that they recognise to have “real world impact”, when of course what is “real”, and the “truth” that supports that reality, is heavily circumscribed by the neoliberal discourse in the first place. As Cohen et al. (2009: 27) explain, what comes to count as knowledge is ‘determined by the social and positional power of the advocates of that knowledge.’

The argument for pragmatism that the teacher effectiveness research movement makes is made from within - and therefore accepting of - the “official truth” of the neoliberal paradigm. Hence teacher effectiveness research can be recognised as making the already known more knowable in the maintenance of the neoliberal project in education. Meanwhile critical educational research, that unsettles accepted norms by detaching the truth from the neoliberal project in education, is increasingly dismissed as hypothetical idealism or needless antagonism because it does not accord with the values and aims of the rooted neoliberal project in education and does not produce “real world” results. For example, Michael Gove, during his tenure as education secretary, famously dismissed left leaning teachers and lecturers in education as ‘the blob’<sup>16</sup>.

Critical education research does not appear to be able to counter the now common sense understanding that the achievement of a free market system in education will bring about social justice and equality. At least not at the level of policy and practice. I have already discussed how the neoliberal project in education repeatedly recasts itself in the role of saviour in response to its own failings and is therefore able to deflect criticism. Further to this, however, the neoliberal project in education, which

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<sup>16</sup> Although I cannot identify the first reference Gove made to ‘the blob’ in relation to left leaning educationalists he used it repeatedly and consistently (see for example Robinson, 2014).



lends itself to quantification, has been able to couple itself to the ‘largely positivist ethos [education] inherited during its historical development and professionalization as a legitimate field of study’ (Peters and Burbules, 2004: 4) and is therefore able to dismiss criticism because it has the weight of the academy behind it. Indeed, Newfield (2008) goes as far to argue that critical theory, developed as a dialectical counterpoint to the cold numerical efficiency of scientific advancement since the Enlightenment (particularly in the wake of mechanised warfare in the twentieth century) has been irrevocably overtaken by the quest for profit in the West. He is not alone in thinking this way. Letizia (2008) suggests that neoliberalism has emerged as the inevitable victor in a fight for the values that shape the Enlightenment and can therefore be recognised to stand for the ‘Enlightenment-usurped by capitalism’ (ibid: 175).

### *2.5.2 Beyond the simple inclusion of teacher voice*

Based on the understanding that identity is shaped and expressed through the (re)telling of stories, much of the local research into teacher identity that does exist involves the inclusion of first-person teacher narratives in some form or another. This is perhaps not surprising; as Connelly & Clandinin (1999: 120) point out, teacher narratives can powerfully express their authors’ professional identities within changing contexts, providing a more direct understanding of the relationship between individual agency and the social structures that shape and are shaped by it. Likewise, Rodgers and Scott (2008: 733) highlight ‘awareness and voice’ as being a place ‘where the normative demands of the external encounter the internal meaning making and desires of the teacher.’

The simple inclusion of teacher voice in educational enquiries does not, however, guarantee that the dynamic between these two can be brought to the fore. As Lather (2009) points out, there is an inherent power dynamic involved in any interview

situation: the role of interviewer carries with it an authority because he or she controls the conversation event. For example, the qualitative interview, harnessed positivistically, services the teacher effectiveness research movement by offering “chalk-face” endorsement of pedagogic tools that improve teacher practice according to the “truth” of neoliberal precepts and norms. Somewhat ironically then, rather than facilitating a critique of the institutions where they work, the inclusion of teacher voice in educational enquiries can serve to bolster the neoliberal project in education, due to it being constrained by researchers in the hunt for a centralised pedagogy towards the realisation of neoliberal goals. The audit culture has redefined the purpose of qualitative research methods, such as the narrative interview. This can be recognised as the purposeful disciplining of qualitative research through neoliberal governance. As Lather (2013: 636) surmises:

The [current] contest over the science that can provide the evidence for practice and policy pits the recharged positivism of neoliberalism against a qualitative “community” at risk of assimilation and the reduction of qualitative to an instrumentalism that meets the demands of audit culture.

### *2.5.3 Narratives of resistance that reinforce neoliberal dominance in schooling*

The literature addressing the neoliberal project in education concentrates principally on ideological exposure. There are very few examples of how and why teachers concede to perform as neoliberal subjects at the level of the subject and the processes through which neoliberalism has been internalised (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Hall & McGinity, 2015). There are, however, numerous examples of localised accounts where teachers

appear to successfully resist performing what might be recognised as aspects of a neoliberal teacher identity. These purportedly critical narratives often take the form of either verbatim accounts taken during interview, or autoethnographic narratives that provide examples of how teachers or teacher managers have overcome specific concerns with regards to the technicization of their professional role (see for example: Vasconcelos, 2011; Attard and Armour, 2005; Pepper & Thomas, 2002). A number of these redemptive narratives relate to the audit culture as experienced by education researchers in HE, likely due to this being the site of the author-researcher's personal frustrations (see for example Sparkes, 2007). Often humanist-orientated, the authors set out to demonstrate how - through the sheer force of their commitment to care - they have overcome the quantification constraints of the audit culture on their relationships with staff or students towards achieving social justice.

By taking a heroic stance, however, and writing about themselves as autonomous change agents in their enquiries, the research-authors' of such narratives run the risk of undermining their enquiry's critical purpose (Archer 2000: 7). Instead of offering the intended reparative glimpse of alternative practice, they reinforce how social justice can be achieved from within the neoliberal paradigm if only individual teachers commit to working hard enough. It provides evidence that the blame for any democratic failures of the neoliberal project in education are due to the unsuccessful enactment of policy on a local level and that this can be overcome. This returns us to the neoliberal project in education's ability to recast itself as the hero in relation to attempts to frustrate it (Peck, 2010: 23).

At worst, the subjective certainty with which such 'victory narratives' (Pillow, 2003) are written, and the (more-often-than-not) successful resolution they present at their dénouement - often in a scene of final reconciliation of the teacher with him or

herself - means an audience might interpret them as neoliberal exercises in self-promotion. Relations of power are simplified so that participants are positioned as heroically labouring under the oppression of centralised control, waiting for the “correct” theory to emancipate them (which, often, the self-same enquiry looks to provide). Such narratives offer little insight into the concerns of this enquiry, that is how teachers struggle and fail to overcome the operations of power that the neoliberal project in education relies on to secure their compliance. Atkinson and Rosiek (2009: 178) summarise these concerns in the following way:

Ideological and discursive limits on teachers’ ability to reflect can be ignored or suppressed in first-person teacher narratives... [they] fail[s] to provide an account of the richness, drama, and difficulty (even failure) of teachers’ reflections, and consequently this kind of teacher knowledge research often ends up producing representations of teachers’ thinking that feels moralistic and preachy.

Through this unproblematised use of teacher voice in the representation of teacher resistance, qualitative teacher identity research is rooted within - and therefore sustains - the neoliberal project in education despite, perhaps, critical intentions.

In the next chapter I turn to the challenge of constructing a methodology that can access, capture and (re)present a teacher voice that is not afraid to articulate the moral and ethical frustrations and compromises teachers experience as a consequence of *failing* to resist the dominant neoliberal conception of teacher identity. I argue that in order to achieve this it is necessary for the enquiry to function from within a critique of this humanist logic.

### **3 Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Introduction***

In my literature review I have mapped out the ‘historical terrain’ (Olssen, 2003) of the neoliberal teacher-subject in the English secondary school in relation to how the neoliberal project in education has emerged and established its “truth”. I now turn my attention to illuminating through enquiry the techniques and effects of power that work through them to achieve their compliance.

Having discussed in my Literature Review how the neoliberal project in education increasingly circumscribes what is and what is not “sayable”, in this chapter I go on to argue that a more developed understanding of the techniques and effects of power by which the neoliberal project secures teachers’ compliance might be achieved by locating for analysis the site of secondary school teachers’ subjective struggle (between compliance and resistance). I begin by interrogating the philosophical assumptions underpinning this approach; in particular, how this enquiry is situated within a critique of humanism.

With reference to Foucauldian (1980b) theory, I go on to propose that the application of innovative/strategic ethnographic methods, in conjunction with an experimental ‘storying’ approach, might achieve access to a less mediated teacher voice in the English secondary school.

For the purposes of conceptual clarity, I would like to draw a distinction between my usage of the terms ‘methodology’ and ‘methods’ in this chapter: I use ‘methodology’ to refer to my overall research design; whereas I refer to ‘methods’ to indicate the procedures - or “tools” - by which I conduct data collection and analysis. Further to this, any references to ‘qualitative’ or ‘qualitative research’ relate to the type and nature of the methods I employed.

### ***3.2 Philosophical positioning***

In this first section of my Methodology chapter I locate the enquiry within the (post)critical research paradigm. I use the term ‘paradigm’ here to describe the philosophical intent and motivation underlying my enquiry’s methodology (Cohen et al, 2007; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Mertens, 2005; Walter 2006). To this end, and in relation to my research questions, I discuss the beliefs I hold with regards to the nature of reality that accord with this paradigm (ontology), and what it is possible to learn about said reality (epistemology) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 108).

#### ***3.2.1 A critical approach***

The purpose of my enquiry into teacher identity is to disrupt the status quo in secondary education that I have mapped out in my literature review. I hope to contribute to a counterproject that looks to subvert the neoliberal project in education by raising awareness of the temporal nature of its “truth” and the social injustice it perpetuates. Moreover, I look to give voice to secondary school teachers’ concerns about the current culture in secondary schools in England that are currently ‘muted’ (Hall & McGinity 2015) by neoliberal governance. I refer to Foucault’s (1994) definition of governance here. He describes governance as the purposeful direction of other people’s conduct: ‘modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that [are] destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others’ (ibid: 341). In other words, the practice of purposefully directing social agents to specified ends (Dean, 1991: 12).

Seeking to address the marginalisation of teacher voice in this way places my research within the critical paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). As Crotty (1998: 157) asserts, a critical methodology is directed at ‘interrogating values

and assumptions, exposing hegemony and injustice, challenging conventional social structures and engaging in social action'. The ontological position of the critical paradigm is recognised as historical realism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 110). Historical realism is the perspective that what is taken for reality is actually socially constructed, in other words what is taken to be "real" is an artifice or structure that has come to prominence as a consequence of the interplay of value laden factors such as culture and politics (ibid). Critical research therefore seeks to examine realities from 'a cultural, historical and political stance' (Scotland, 2012: 14). For example, in my Literature Review, in relation to the neoliberal project in education, I have asked 'questions about how what is has come to be' (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002: 124) and 'whose interests are served by [these] particular institutional arrangements'.

My methodology is concerned with how teachers might be released - or rather release themselves - from relations of power that lead to adopting pedagogy in the secondary school that perpetuates social injustice. As Creswell (2003) points out, critical research that contains an emancipatory aim such as this is necessarily and unavoidably 'intertwined with politics and a political agenda' (9-10). This being the case, she goes on to argue that it is an ethical responsibility on the part of the critical researcher to make his or her politics and prejudices clear throughout. I have duly looked to do this, stating upfront that I believe the egalitarian principles that the neoliberal project in education professes to be built upon have not - and will not - be realised.

### *3.2.2 Putting poststructuralism to work*

Anti-foundationalist poststructural thinking, particularly that of Foucault, has played an important role in the development of my thesis. As Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) explain, since the last decades of the twentieth century onwards critical theory has been

‘overhauled by the “post-discourses”’ (90) towards a complete reconceptualisation of the paradigm. To signal that I recognise the poststructural orientation of this critical enquiry as part of the diverse and dynamic evolution of critical theory in the social sciences I have placed the ‘post’ of (post)critical theory in brackets in the description of my philosophical positioning.

Poststructuralism, or rather the thinking of scholars who have become associated with the movement (including some who - characteristic of the movement - are critical of the label), is broadly recognised to critique the notion that there are foundations to knowledge (Hoy, 2005; Lather, 1993; Peters 2001). It refutes the notion that there are taken-for-granted concepts that are indisputable upon which knowledge can built (Humes & Bryce, 2003). Poststructuralism therefore necessarily raises questions with regards to the influence of social and historical factors in the process of knowledge production (Peters & Burbules, 2004).

I put poststructuralism to work to critique humanist assumptions in traditional qualitative critical research in this enquiry. I refer to a particular manifestation and application of humanism here: the prominent belief, since the Enlightenment, that the correct application of reason in social enquiry contributes to moving towards a universal (or transcendental) “truth” with regards to the human condition and human affairs (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). This use of humanism has justified the neoliberal project in education in creating and sustaining its knowledge project to the exclusion of others (ibid: 5). Not least (and as I argued in my Literature Review) through the compatibility between the belief in a singular truth that is objectively verifiable and the datafication and audit culture involved in the commoditisation process (Peters & Burbules, 2004; Newfield, 2008).



### 3.2.3 *The plurality of teacher identity*

The poststructuralist troubling of the teacher-subject as non-unified (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000) in this enquiry assumes a positive conception of power. By this, I mean I recognise that the neoliberal project in education does not oppress teachers, but rather it *produces* them as subjects. This conception of power as a productive force has important epistemological implications.

Latterly, Foucault's (1990) thinking turned towards locating the constitution of the subject in relation to the constant, dynamic interplay between compliance and resistance towards discourse. In this sense, he argued, the individual can be recognised as 'an effect of power' (ibid: 98)<sup>17</sup>. My approach to enquiry, drawing on these understandings, assumes that through specific, context contingent operations of power, teachers are incentivised to self-regulate their own behaviour towards the realisation of a professional identity that supports the neoliberal project in education. Thus, the neoliberal project in education shapes teachers' professional identity, not simply by exerting external pressure, but through making this identity desirable so that they readily perform it. As Davies and Gannon (2005: 318) explain:

The subject is inscribed, not just from outside of herself, but through actively taking up the values, norms and desires that make her into a recognizable, legitimate member of her social group.

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<sup>17</sup> For a succinct account of the shift in Foucault's thinking across his career, see Marshall (1996)

The review of the literature revealed broader structural reasons as to why this might be. However, if we accept that teacher compliance involves processes through which neoliberalism has been internalised and becomes teachers' sense of professional-self, it follows that, in order to develop fuller understandings of the techniques and effects of power by which this is achieved, access to the push and pull of compliance and resistance at the level of the subject *during* formation will be required. This is the methodological challenge I have set myself.

### *3.2.4 Emancipatory "limitations" of the (post)critical position*

Acknowledging that realities are constructed locally and specifically by individual teachers marks a shift away from a historical realist ontology towards a more relativist one. From a relativist perspective, realities are recognised to be individual mental constructions in relation to the social world rather than shared (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 110-11). Whilst there may be commonalities amongst and across teacher-subjects' constructions that can be usefully discussed and explored in order to highlight how the neoliberal project in education maintains its hold on the "truth", precisely how each individual teacher experiences the associated techniques and effects of power is unique and therefore has to be approached as such by the educational researcher. Likewise, recognising power to be diffuse and productive rather than centralised and oppressive shifts the emancipatory intentions of critical research to the level of the individual teacher.

As Foucault (1977) asserts, the role of the critical intellectual is to challenge power by undermining it. He argues that critical enquiry should contribute to the struggle against power and not simply intellectualise the power struggle that the marginalised face for the purposes of illumination, a position which serves to make

critical research inert due to such an academic “rally cry” being removed from the site of struggle. The struggle against power in critical enquiry, he argues, is best aimed:

at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious. It is not to awaken consciousness that we struggle but to sap power, to take power; it is an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power, and not their illumination (ibid: 208).

Therefore, rather than looking to strengthen marginalised resistance through the production of a grand liberatory theory from a privileged position (one that remains distant from the struggles teachers are involved in at the “chalk-face”), my aim is to contribute to the *weakening* of the neoliberal project in education by detaching the power of the truth from it. In other words, I regard my researcher-self to be working alongside and in support of teachers who offer localised resistance towards the neoliberal project in education, but whose voices are increasingly marginalised<sup>18</sup>.

I discussed in my Literature Review how the neoliberal discourse is adept at reinventing itself. This being the case, (post)critical education research will need to continually contest how the unstable power relations involved in neoliberal governance are renewed and reaffirmed in different ways in local contexts (Bălan, 2010). Central, then, to the shaping of this thesis is the view that, in direct contrast to the current

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<sup>18</sup> A common critique of educational enquiries drawing on Foucault’s thinking is that it ‘stress[es] the impossibility of freeing oneself from power relations’ (Ball 2013: 146). This, I suggest, is because educational researchers tend to draw on his earlier work. Foucault’s (1997) rejection of the modernist conception of an essential self later in his later work, involves the recognition that the free subject must exist as a predication of the resistance inherent in power relations (Butin in Ball, 2013: 148).

‘effective teacher’ research movement (see Sawyer, 2004; and Gale & Skourdoumbis, 2013), the role of education research is to exercise an ongoing scepticism towards prescription. By revealing how specific procedures and techniques of power influence teachers’ professional constitution, they might be better placed to successfully subvert or evade them (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Hall & McGinity, 2015). Whilst this accords with the critical research paradigm’s core belief that knowledge is empowerment, it suggests it should be directed towards an ongoing process of individual disentanglement from power relations (Hiley, 1985: 73).

This grounding of the emancipatory desire offers the potential for the transferability of findings with regards to the structures and rules the neoliberal project in education utilises in its operations of power. Local investigations such as this one offer other (post)critical education researchers a “place to start” by being able to look for evidence of similar insidious operations of power through comparison. This is not a recourse to foundational thinking however, because what is recognised as supraindividual here is understood to be sociohistorical in origin (rather than transcendental) (McCarthy, 1994).

### *3.2.5 Avoiding textual claims to authority*

To achieve these emancipatory aims - and as I have already touched upon - I have to be mindful not to make claims to authority. As Hytten (2004: 96) asserts, critical scholars who believe they are ‘the ones in the know’, and impose their understandings onto research-participants, are guilty of substituting one form of hegemony for another. With this in mind, I now turn my attention to the ways in which I have ensured balance and dialogue between my own understandings and those of the teacher-participants.

Perhaps most importantly, and as I stated in my introduction, this enquiry progressed inductively: the strategic ethnographic field work and subsequent creative (re)presentation of this data was conducted concurrent with the review of the literature and theorisation. Therefore, the data did not - and could not - serve as evidence for predetermined theory. This was a conscious decision on my part to look to ground my research as far as is possible in the lived understandings of teachers rather than impose my understandings upon them (Lather, 1991). As Visweswaran (1994: 80) asserts, critical researchers who wish to avoid evidencing orthodoxy should 'look to know by way of not knowing' and, to this end, I have attempted to ensure genuine dialogue between theory and lived experience (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000: 303; Quantz, 1992: 475).

I have also tried, throughout the writing of this thesis, to remain genuinely reflective throughout. Two key ways in which I attempt to do this are: firstly, I look to open dialogic opportunities by prompting a productive scepticism in the research-audience (Leavy, 2015: 58; Stewart, 1996) by drawing attention to my interpretive role through the self-conscious crafting, or 'smoothing' (Bruner, 1987) of the data into stories; secondly, whilst I advocate the need for teachers to regain increased control of their professional constitution, I have been careful to ensure that the political and moral thinking involved in this advocacy does not prevent new understandings to emerge (Noblit et al., 2004: 24). In relation to this latter point, I have looked to follow where the data takes me (Madison, 2012) and remained mindful of the 'demands made by the other' (Caputo, 1997: 15). This does not mean that I have acquiesced to the understandings of the researched in what amounts to a 'romanticising' (Quantz 1992) of teacher voice, but rather I (re)present teacher voice *in relation to* theory that extends its

critical possibilities through an analysis of the discursive possibilities and/or limits that have enabled and/or constrained it.

This returns us to the point I made with regards to the transferability of any findings: the sociohistorical is foregrounded rather than any transcendental claims on behalf of either the researcher and his expertise or the local understandings of the researched (McCarthy, 1994). Importantly, this recognises the enquiry's pedagogic potential for all concerned (Hytten, 2004).

### ***3.3 Employing strategic ethnographic methods to access a site of subjective struggle***

In this second section of my Methodology chapter, I explain how I put Foucaultian theory to work in order to problematise teacher voice. I suggest that in order to develop better understandings of how and why teachers concede to perform as neoliberal subjects it is necessary to approach teacher voice as discursively positioned and produced. I argue that strategic/innovative forms of ethnography are therefore advantageous in education settings where neoliberal modes of governmentality increasingly circumscribe the “(un)speakable”. In particular, I make the case that gossip, as conduit for subjugated knowledge, opens the researcher to more robust insights with regards to the culture in the English secondary school than is possible via traditional means.

#### ***3.3.1 The problem of problematising voice***

The neoliberal discourse has been able to thoroughly insinuate itself into public school culture through a remodelling of teacher practice norms, but how does it achieve this on the level of the individual social actor? Why do secondary school teachers in England

allow themselves to become the ‘appropriated subjects of the new social order’ (Davies & Bansel, 2007)?

As Hall and McGinity (2015: 12) make clear, ‘affordances for professional practices lying outside of neoliberal subjectivities have been dramatically reduced’. In my experience as a secondary school teacher, I recognise - and indeed feel - a reduction in agency. We are not, however, the entirely ‘passive’ agents the broader critical accounts might suggest. Resistance does exist but it is ‘muted’ (ibid). I now turn my attention to identifying in more detail the failures of teacher voice in qualitative education research (Mazzei and Jackson, 2009) in order to develop an understanding of how I might “work” these in enquiry.

I began to discuss towards the end of my Literature Review the potential reasons why there are so few examples in the literature that reveal by what techniques and effects of power teacher identity dissonance (Warin et al, 2006) is resolved towards a neoliberal performance. Having explored how qualitative research methods such as the narrative interview are increasingly disciplined to service the neoliberal project in education, I proffered that even when qualitative methods are utilised with critical intention teachers are afraid to admit to and articulate resistance. I wish to expand on this second point before going on to explain how I look to overcome the problem through my design and application of experimental research methods.

Firstly, it is likely that individual teachers will be reluctant to admit to contributing to a system that does not support all students to achieve (indeed - and to return to Connell’s (2013: 106) point - the neoliberal project in education relies on extracting advantage both within and to promote a logic of competition). Further to this, asking teachers to discuss the concessions they have made towards the neoliberal circumscription of their professional role unavoidably exposes their (failed) resistance

towards it. This returns us to the unified understandings of self that teachers are encouraged to hold in the West (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000), and the difficulty this presents the education researcher who seeks evidence of - through the analysis of teacher voice - uncertainty with regards to the formation of professional identity. As Edley (2001: 195) asserts:

when people are encouraged or forced to see the contradictions in their own identity 'project', they often feel defensive or embarrassed.

In relation to this, educational researchers cannot expect teachers to readily destroy their social viability by criticising the culture in the schools where they teach; “whistle-blowing”, whilst socially responsible, can lead individual teachers to become social pariah. As discussed previously, a school can quickly enter into a cycle of negative decline if its reputation is questioned, with parents choosing to send their children elsewhere as a consequence and the social and financial implications of a falling roll is damaging to the working conditions for teaching staff.

Atkinson and Rosiek (2009: 186) posit a further reason that teachers might not be forthcoming: they suggest that the wider consequences of teachers revealing self-doubts might be recognised by the management in schools as an indicator that levels of accountability and external regulation need to be increased, which teachers likely wish to avoid.

In summary, teachers feel obliged to put institutional concerns ahead of their personal concerns because they are: reluctant to acknowledge that they are involved in socially unjust practice; afraid of destroying their social viability within the school



where they work (Ball, 2003; Stevenson and Wood, 2013); and concerned that they might potentially worsen working conditions for themselves and their colleagues. These factors all play a part in what so successfully captures and circumscribes the contribution and presentation of teacher voice in education research within the neoliberal. This accords with the findings of Hall and McGinity (2015), who acknowledge how the interview participants in their study into teacher identity were reticent to criticise their employer - and their reaction to and implementation of policy - with regards to the professional role they were expected to perform in the neoliberal secondary school.

If qualitative education researchers are to avoid evidencing orthodoxy they therefore need to attend in their listening to what is not already recognised and accepted as teacher voice in their enquiries. As Mazzei and Jackson (2009) put it, accepted notions of participant voice in education research need to be ‘strained’ in order to develop new understandings of how voice is mediated in the first place. They go on to advocate qualitative enquiry that pushes the limits of voice and encourage researchers to risk stepping away from historically situated notions of data and data collection. With this in mind, in order to understand why, increasingly, there is an imbalance towards compliance in teachers’ identity formation, I have designed and applied experimental, qualitative research methods in an attempt to locate a less mediated teacher voice.

To develop new understandings about the impact of the “truth” of the neoliberal project in education on the constitution of teachers’ professional identity, I take an innovative/strategic ethnographic approach. I have purposefully sought out teacher talk - and the local knowledge it can be recognised to contain therein - that is situated towards the limits of what is considered “sayable” within the rules attached to the “truth” of the neoliberal project in education. The resistance inherent in choosing to use

a mode of talk, or ‘speech genre’ (Bakhtin, 1986), that is not considered legitimate by the neoliberal project in education provides a potentially valuable research site where power and resistance can be seen to collide at the level of the teacher-subject; it offers the researcher an insight into how neoliberalising (Canaan, 2013) techniques and procedures work through teachers to achieve their compliance *within* its broader project.

My application of experimental ethnographic methods can therefore be recognised as a resistive response to the tightening hold neoliberalism has on qualitative enquiry (Lather 2013). This is an attempt to move away from an idealized conception of participant voice in enquiry, or, as Lather (2009: 20) puts it:

[a] romance of the speaking subject and a metaphysics of presence that threatens to collapse ethnography under the weight of circumscribed modes of identity, intentionality and selective appropriation.

### *3.3.2 The periphery of the ethnographer’s gaze: there is something at play in teachers’ ‘throwaway’ conversation*

To return to my example of the INSET day which I described in some detail in the introduction of this thesis, in contrast to the silence that descended when they were asked for a response to the portrait of what a good teacher should be, teachers resistant to the neoliberal teacher identity expected of them spoke more openly to one another in a covert conversation over a cup of tea, in between - temporally and spatially - the official narrative of the INSET day. It struck me, therefore, that there is something important at play in such “throwaway” conversation.

I use the word ‘play’ here to describe an attitude towards covert conversation as a social interaction (following Bruner, 1983). Play is essentially democratic in nature: it is freely entered into and the laws - or rules - governing it are negotiated by the participants. Further to this, for play to sustain itself it is necessary that the established rules achieve parity of participation (Nussbaum, 2010).

Likewise, in teachers’ covert conversation there appears to be active and equal deliberation of the rules governing the exchange. Conspiratorial in character, teachers participate in the social play of throwaway conversation on the understanding that it is bound temporally and spatially. Put another way, it is agreed and understood by those involved that what is said remains within the parameters of the conversation event.

This agreed culture amongst participants creates a safe space: institutional fear is temporarily replaced by curiosity and the willingness to take what would otherwise be recognised as a social risk.

This unofficial, playful teacher talk does not depend on established regimes of thought for its validation; rather it is autonomous and non-centralised. To use Foucault’s (1980b: 82) term, the knowledge transferred through the practice of covert conversation is ‘subjugated’, disqualified by the dominant discourse as ‘a naïve knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity’ (ibid). Foucault maintains that critique functions through the insurrection of such knowledge:

... it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges...a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force solely to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it — that criticism performs its work (ibid: 82).

I have up until now used the term “throwaway” to refer to teacher talk that is shared covertly between trusted teacher colleagues. Whilst such talk could belong to any speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986), it is worth noting that certain types seem more suited to clandestine delivery, including (but not exclusively): gossip, rumour and anecdote. Of these, gossip is arguably disqualified by the dominant discourse as having the least bearing on official “truth”. It is deemed to be deviant in character and associated with idleness and/or malevolence (Baumeister et al, 2004: 120). This distance from the official “truth” of the neoliberal project in education make gossip sites particularly playful spaces for teachers, where criticisms can be aired more safely.

But precisely what game is *being played* in the performance of a speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986), like gossip in schools? An example of what Foucault (1997: 297) refers to as a ‘game of truth’, gossip appears to be employed by teachers as a strategy to question the ‘set of rules by which truth is produced’. Games of truth allow subjects to explore the self by prying open a creative, liminal space in between existing interpretive frameworks. Also, perhaps, to discover personal truths from which to build a sense of self that is - due to the pervasiveness of the “truth” of the dominant discourse - as yet unarticulated<sup>19</sup>.

Because gossip is dismissed by the dominant discourse, the pressure to appear to be a unified subject as institutional demands dictate is temporarily lifted in a performance of the possibilities of difference. To borrow Goffman’s (1990) theatre metaphor, as offstage actors talking amongst themselves, teachers allow themselves to be observed making sense of the relationships between the multiple subject positions

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<sup>19</sup> Heron (1996: 165) refers to this as ‘experiential knowing’, when something is felt but not yet fully grasped.

they and others hold (and the contradictions that occur as a result) in the maintenance, negotiation and reinvention of their professional identity. This accords with Foster's (2004) conception of gossip, who suggests that individuals use gossip as a strategy to determine and convey their view of the world: '[t]o no small extent, we learn how to behave, think, and communicate from and with gossip' (ibid: 95).

Recent studies explore the association between unethical behaviour and an increase in creativity (see, for example, Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014). This perhaps goes some way to explaining why teachers turn to gossip to grapple with the ethical compromises they feel they have to make in the performance of a neoliberal teacher identity. Gossip, with its characteristic distortions of "truth" through embellishment and exaggeration, is a safe - or rather securely controlled - environment for teachers to break institutional rules with regards to what is and what is not "sayable" so as to think anew (Shaw, 2019). Gossip can be seen to be inherently creative if creativity is understood as a deviation in thinking from what has gone before (a notion captured in the popularly used idiom to "think outside the box"). It is a speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986) which participants employ in order to deviate from established discourse and employ their creativity 'to think otherwise about prevailing norms' (Leach, 2000: 231).

Teacher gossip can therefore be recognised to contest 'the [coercive] effects of the centralising powers which are linked to the institution' (Foucault, 1980: 84), which, in the context of the English secondary school, include: school management; external regulatory bodies, such as Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE); and, lest we forget, educational research. It is a playful space in the margins of official discourse where teachers can discuss their personal views with regards to teacher practice norms more openly, including the ethical frustrations and compromises they and others have experienced as a consequence of *failing* to resist the dominant neoliberal conception of

teacher identity. In this regard, and as de Souza (1994) points out, gossip is an inherently democratic process.

This thesis proceeds, then, on a conception of teachers' gossip as an attempt to complete self-work towards the freedom of the constituted subject; a first-person truth practice in which teachers, as self-scrutinizing subjects, 'actively search out the knowledge that can set them free' (Zhao, 2012: 462). This conception of gossip, freely entered into and positioned as it is on the margins of institutional discourse, offers the educational researcher a less-mediated teacher voice to incorporate into their research: one which, through its involvement in identity work (the resistance towards or adherence to a prevailing teacher identity), offers an alternate view of life at the "chalk-face" than the dominant discourse would have them see. It is my hope that conceptualising gossip amongst teachers as the potential site of performances of resistance will act as 'a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used' (Foucault, 1982: 211). In other words, inquiring into gossip as a subjugated discourse, could usefully offer some insight into the cultural conditions that allow for - or perhaps necessitate - gossip as a site of resistance to emerge in the first place.

### *3.3.3 Locating, observing and recording the operations of teacher gossip*

Having argued that gossip is a potential site where the working through of teachers' subjective struggle can be accessed by the ethnographer in education, and that this might usefully reveal some of the techniques and effects of power that lead to the internalisation of the neoliberal in the teacher-subject, I now turn my attention to how I went about the classification and collection of data in the field in light of the ethical concerns with regards to the use of "overheard" conversation.

For conceptual clarity, I define gossip-events as involving a “triad”: they occur between “gossiper” and “listener/respondent” where a third, absent subject is discussed, which I will refer to as the “target”. This accords with Bergmann’s (1993) classifications.

### 3.3.3.1 Insider status

I made notes on the gossip I heard and participated in across a single academic year (September 2016 - September 2017). This timeframe seemed appropriate in order to catch the waxing and waning of gossip in relation to the rhythms of the schools (where students are identified by year group, and terminal examinations mark the climax of the school year).

I took to keeping a field journal, or, as Bergmann (1993: 36) calls it, a ‘behaviour report’, so that - subsequent to a gossip-event - I could record the linguistic, prosodic, and non-verbal gossip-data I observed. This data collection method is most suited to my topic because the phenomenon under enquiry only takes place in an unmanaged space and therefore the imposition of any recording apparatus would undoubtedly alter the behaviour of participants (I go on to discuss the specifics of this method of data collection in relation to the ethical implications of collecting and (re)presenting gossip in work-place ethnography below).

A common criticism of critical ethnography in schools is that the distance between the researcher and researched can lead to theory-heavy macro analysis that prioritises researcher expertise over local knowledge (Hyttén, 2004: 99; Jordan & Yeoman, 1995: 400). As a teacher, training provider and examiner across several school sites in the South West of England, I attained a degree of insider status, however, which afforded me access to public-private gossip-events for the purposes of this enquiry. In

some instances, I gained sufficient trust as an “intimate” insider to be positioned as a gossip recipient myself.

Further to this, by minimising my interruption in the field and allowing concepts to emerge in relation to the descriptions I made, any new understandings about gossip as a discursive construct in which subjects choose to invest remained ‘grounded in the realities of daily existence’ (Jorgensen, 1989: 14) rather than artificially extracted. Put simply, writing from the position of a participant, any emergent theory is grounded in the self-understandings (Lather, 1991: 65) of secondary school teachers. However minimising my impact in the field raises ethical concerns with regards to participant consent (Carmel, 2011).

### 3.3.3.2 Ethical implications

Similar to what Turnock and Gibson (2001) refer to as a ‘semi-covert’ approach to ethnographic data collection, I made participants aware of my role as researcher at the outset, along with an explanation of the general nature of my research, but subsequently looked to continue to act as an accepted member of the community<sup>20</sup>. By taking this approach I hoped to ensure the validity of my data in two important respects:

- i) Avoiding having to interrupt the ‘flow’ of activity under observation to seek individual consent whenever a new participant entered the field;
- ii) Limiting the impact of my presence - as a researcher – in the field.

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<sup>20</sup> I sought permission from the schools where I conducted field research at the beginning of the academic year. I explained that I was researching the current climate in state secondary schools in England through an analysis of teacher voice. Management and staff were assured that any conversation I was privy to would not be directly (re)presented in my final research report and individuals were given the opportunity to ‘opt-out’ at any point.



From the outset my enquiry was attempt to understand the relationship *between* multiple gossip sites in order to distance the object of the enquiry from the teacher-subjects themselves as ‘others’ and towards ‘the other that constructs and is constructed by the subject's imaginary’ (Marcus, 1999: 7-8). In the case of this enquiry, this relates to the broader cultural conditions in the English secondary school that allows for gossip - as a site of resistance - to emerge within the institutional rules that define the limits of what is and what is not sayable (Foucault, 1991: 59). Reconfiguring the relationship between researcher and subject around this imaginary meant I did not focus intensively upon a single site of ethnographic observation and participation. Nor did I attempt to accurately (re)present a specific person, place or exchange. Rather, in my field notes, and in my subsequent (re)presentation of the data in story-form, I attempted to listen *through* - or beyond - the gossip-events I observed and/or participated in in order to grasp the cultural processes that created the conditions for their emergence. This resulted in what might be best described as a “collage” of observational notes in my field journal, including:

- Descriptions of the physical environment (where gossip-events took place in the school and how participants interacted with it);
- Snippets of dialogue (including the quality of vocal delivery related to tone, volume, and emphasis etc.);
- Behaviours (for example, the body language that teachers who are involved in a gossip-event would adopt).

I was careful not to include identifiers of any sort in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and I kept my field journal secure at all times, locked in my desk in my office at school. I would render - broadly - my interpretation of the gossip-events I had observed and/or participated in at the end of the working day.

I considered my field notes secondary to the intuitive experience of being in the school context, and therefore the journal was primarily meant as an aide memoir.

Indeed, I doubt the notes would make much sense to anyone other than myself. Mulhall (2003: 311) confirms this is typical of notes made by ethnographers in the field:

the nature of participant observation and the difficulties in writing conspire to ensure that field notes are messy, loose texts that make no claim to be final or fixed versions. Moreover, many would concede that field notes are only comprehensible to their author...

Accompanying the “collage” of external observations, I would also make personal, reflective comments in a separate column on each page about what I thought - and how I felt - about being in the field, including making links to any theoretical readings and the extent to which they enrich or perhaps lead my readings of the field. To see example pages from my field journal please refer to Appendix 1.

I have to admit to a degree of ethical unease during the collection of the data, despite the permissions I had obtained and the measures I put in place to ensure participant anonymity. The member checks following the reworking of the data into story-form did much to assuage my concerns, however. During the process of writing the stories, which was concurrent with the collection of data, I would share my work-in-progress with teacher colleagues within the school where I worked (and where I collected the majority of my data). This member checking served two purposes. Firstly, I wanted to check the verisimilitude (Loh, 2013) of the storied accounts as examples of the cultural conditions in the English state secondary school (i.e. whether the stories resonated – or “rung true” – from within their own experiences as teachers). Secondly, I wanted to check that the stories were sufficiently removed from the context/s where the data was collected to ensure the anonymity of participants. I would redraft the stories in

light of my colleagues' responses, with the aim being to ensure that the two storied accounts presented within this thesis are:

- 1) An accurate portrayal of how neoliberalising (Canaan, 2013) techniques and procedures work through teachers to secure their compliance in the English state secondary school;
- 2) Clearly support teachers' concerns with regards to the neoliberal identity they are required to perform;
- 3) Do not explicitly or implicitly identify specific schools, staff or students.

In other words, the data is rendered sufficiently allegorical (see Denzin, 1996: 748).

The stories can be recognised as an analytical extrapolation from the data I recorded in my field notes towards a critique of the cultural conditions that led to its production (Pierides, 2010: 190). 'Symbolically equivalent substitutes' (Yalom, 1991: x) are employed to communicate my emergent understandings of the field and the patterns that presented themselves across participants and sites, a process I discuss in more detail presently.

### 3.3.3.3 Identifying the "right type" of gossip

By observing how, as interactors, participants revealed to one another what is meant by their speech acts<sup>21</sup> and how these speech acts are received, I looked to gain access to the gossip and listener/respondent's locally produced meaning in order to explore individuals' deployment of gossip in relation to the spatial and discursive conditions

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<sup>21</sup> Following Austin (1962) I use the term 'speech acts' here to emphasise how I focused my observations on identifying what was meant by the gossip (i.e. the purpose "behind" sharing their gossip / entering into a gossip-event) rather than the surface – or propositional - content of the utterance.

that enable, constrain and/or provoke it.

I was conscious of not allowing my worldview to be repeated back to me by trusted colleagues. I therefore remained mindful to look – or rather listen – carefully to the gossip beyond the potential “echo chamber” of my own social circle. For example, due to my insider status I often found myself positioned as the direct recipient in the gossip triad and therefore the character of the data I collected was forged in the nature of the relationship I held with the gossiper. To compensate for this bias, I made sure to only draw on the gossip I was privy to as a direct recipient if I recognised the ethics of the absent gossip target being explored bore similarities to gossip narratives I had already overheard (in a situation where I was positioned outside of the gossip triad).

I looked to record narratives where the push and pull of power and resistance in the social interactions being explored through the gossip became apparent. By this, I mean the ‘serious gossip’ (Spack, 1985) teachers entered into that blurred the private and public realms. Whilst I observed instances of teachers seeking to stigmatise the absent other for the purposes of personal empowerment (a more devious practice of teacher gossip that is explored in more detail by Hallett et al., 2009) I only recorded those gossip-events I recognised to be motivated by genuine identity work: that is when narratives were shared between teachers which, through their (re)telling, allowed them to reflect on the machinations of their teacher-self and question their regulation of conduct in relation to the behaviour of absent other/s, whether ultimately condemned, venerated or dismissed as irrelevant.

Some of the gossip narratives I was privy to appeared to serve as cautionary tales, highlighting the personal costs attached to resistance; delivered with a sense of sympathy, relief, or - highlighting the socialising effects of gossip - self-righteousness.

Other narratives appeared to laud the target's attempts to resist being positioned to perform in a way that they personally disagreed with, such narratives were often delivered with admiration.

Finally, there were narratives that appeared to be shared judgement free but with incredulity, with the intention of trying to decipher a colleague's seemingly incongruous behaviours.

Often the discomfort caused by a target's inability to reconcile their professional identity was described by the gossip in terms of its physical manifestations, for example: 'she looks exhausted' or 'he keeps losing his temper'. The identification of changes in behaviour or appearance such as these became a marker for me, and I followed where this data took me.

#### 3.3.3.4 Locating gossip sites

I first looked to identify where and when gossip occurs in the state secondary schools included in my sample. This involved, as Bergmann (1993) points out, resorting to 'an everyday proven method that is connected with gossip itself: to listen where propriety says not to listen' (40).

Giroux (2014) suggests that one of the chief ways in which neoliberalism attempts to prevent critical perspectives towards the market-driven values and individualism it promotes is by eliminating public spaces where private trouble can be translated into a public issue. The rise of e-mail as a form of communication in schools can be seen as symptomatic of this, reducing the need for face-to-face interaction between teacher colleagues. Despite a reduction in size and usage, the staffrooms are still in use - albeit in a reduced capacity - in the schools within my sample and therefore seemed the obvious place to begin collecting data.

I initially recorded the gossip-data I observed in school staffrooms across three school sites (predominantly, however, in the school where I teach). This occurred in January 2016 – June 2016, the academic year previous to the one where the data for this study was collected.

After six months of “listening in” (Bergmann, 1993) to gossip in staffrooms, however, I realised the data I was collecting was not as playful as I had hoped it might be (and knew it could be from first-hand experience). Although on the surface, the conversations appeared to be critical of institutional structure, they were infused with what I would call an insincere camaraderie that lacked the intimacy associated with the gossip (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Yerkovich, 1977). Indeed, sometimes gossip-events were delivered at a volume to facilitate those who were not directly involved in them to be able to overhear. Whilst teachers discussed their personal views with regards to teacher practice norms, this did not include the ethical frustrations and compromises that they and others have experienced as a consequence of *failing* to resist the dominant neoliberal conception of teacher identity. Rather, within the gossip narratives they shared, the gossiper positioned him or herself as a hero, able to overcome ethical quandaries thrown up by the neoliberal project in education. Invariably they would serve as illustrations of ways to either live with or work around identity dissonance, ultimately serving to bolster the neoliberal project in education by demonstrating how problems can be overcome from within it. These bravado anecdotes bore a striking similarity to the first-hand accounts of teacher identity (re)presented in qualitative research that I have discussed previously, and to which Pillow (2003) refers to as ‘victory narratives’.

Such observations might suggest that tolerating gossip in the staffroom is integral to the maintenance of established power relations in some way; that the

insurrection gossip represents is controlled and contained through a sanctioning process that serves to underscore its throwaway nature. Perhaps the act of restricting gossip to communal areas such as the school staffroom, rather than condemning it, serves to characterise the performance of gossip as a social interaction that is necessary only in so far as it allows teachers to ‘purge’ their personal concerns in order to better adhere to the dominant discourse<sup>22</sup>.

As a consequence of such observations, I decided to stop recording conversational data in the staffrooms of the schools I visited and where I work. Instead, I focused on the more spontaneous - less managed - gossip I witnessed and participated in around the school sites. Gossip-events that explored teacher identity norms but were marked by:

- 1) less subjective certainty (heroic or otherwise);
- 2) the absence of a successful resolution.

This involved observing the gossip that occurred in passing moments and in-between places that teachers as social actors discovered themselves - often unintentionally - to be inhabiting: a busy corridor during lesson change-over; a promenade performance whilst teachers are “on duty” at breaktimes or lunchtimes; the staff pigeon holes at the beginning of the school day; the staff car park at the end of the school day. I discovered that it was in these ‘off-stage’ areas in the secondary school where teachers as social actors (to return to Goffman’s (1990) theatre metaphor) felt able to whisper their way towards alternative truths that are not clearly delineated.

With regards to intimacy (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Yerkovich, 1977), these in-between places were often hidden in plain sight, masked by the hubbub of the school

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<sup>22</sup> Although not within the remit of this thesis, there is more work to be done here.

day going on around them (the only exception was the rare occurrence when teachers stumbled across the unexpected privacy of an office or classroom that was not in use).

The content of the gossip in these in-between spaces would often relate to controversial perspectives that were not regulated by institutional demands or, crucially, liberal-humanist ethics, and therefore did not adhere to ‘the bland dialect of mutual regard’ (MacLure, 2011: 998)<sup>23</sup>. It should be mentioned that subsequent analysis revealed no discernible differences according to gender, urban/rural, educational or class backgrounds of the teachers involved in the gossip-events I observed and participated in. This can perhaps be attributed to limited empirical material, for example the gossip-events took place across a limited number of school sites<sup>24</sup>.

### ***3.4 Utilising the liminal-elasticity of the story-form to (re)present the complexities of teacher identity work for the purposes of analysis***

Having established a theoretical framework for employing strategic ethnographic methods in order to access a less mediated teacher voice in the neoliberal school, I now move on to discuss how a more literary (re)presentation of the data seems apt for its subsequent (re)presentation and analysis.

In this section of my Methodology chapter I propose that a ‘storying’ of the ethnographic gossip-data is an effective strategy for the educational researcher to

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<sup>23</sup> For an overview of the literature on gossip from individual, group and organisational perspectives see Henderson (2014).

<sup>24</sup> Feminist studies have highlighted how women have been historically implicated with gossip activity (see for example: Leach, 2000). The suggestion here is that the opinions of particular social groups have been successfully dismissed by the dominant discourse by associating their talk with the gossip genre. Although not in the remit of this thesis, a broader study to explore the extent that this implication occurs in schools would be pertinent.



employ to explore individuals' deployment of gossip in relation to the spatial and discursive conditions that enable, constrain and/or provoke it.

With reference to the broader arguments for storying in social science research (Bell, 2002; Leavy, 2015; Speedy, 2008; and Van Maanen, 2011), and in relation to how storying has been utilised in the context of educational research (Clough, 2002; Reed, 2012; Sikes, 2005), I explore how the liminal-elasticity of the story-form allows for the following in relation to this enquiry:

- Giving voice to teachers' experiences whilst simultaneously accounting for how they are discursively constituted subjects;
- Foregrounding of the multiple - sometimes contradictory - subject positions of participants in a coherent (re)presentation of the incongruences of the social world;
- Capturing and (re)presenting the emotional charge of teacher identity work through the select use of expressive literary features;

I offer examples from existing storied sociological research as well as drawing on the wider literature project to highlight how the theoretical positions I advocate might work in practice. I identify the implications for my own story experiments that make up the second half of this thesis throughout.

#### *3.4.1 Deviance distilled: moving beyond the application of fictionalisation devices towards a storying of the data*

Liberated to stretch or condense time and amalgamate characters and situations to become 'symbolically equivalent substitutes' (Yalom, 1991: x), I was able to identify

themes from across diverse ethnographic sites through the storying of the data that I might otherwise have overlooked.

There appears to be little distinction between the terms ‘fictional ethnography’ and ‘storying’ in the methodological literature (Reed, 2011). Whilst both can be recognised as a narrativisation of data, I have opted to use the term ‘storying’ in this thesis because I think it highlights this process of creatively (re)working the data in order to move beyond the participants’ – and my own – immediate understandings of how they are constituted.

As opposed to applying fictionalisation devices to a direct transcription of the snippets of gossip-data I collected so as to ensure participant anonymity, which the term ‘fictional ethnography’ would seem to me to suggest, I storied what I considered the conditions were for the emergence of the teacher gossip - as sites of resistance - that I observed and participated in. To put this another way, the storying of the data allowed me to listen *through* the teachers’ own stories to hear the operation of broader social discourses that provoked and/or enabled them to emerge as sites of subjective struggle. My status as an insider, and the vast observational data this facilitated access to (in conjunction with the personal experiences I’d accrued that bore similarity to those shared in gossip-events by the participants) meant I felt this approach would not leave me open to charges of ‘othering’ (Fine, 1994; MacLure, 2003); namely, and as Sikes (2005) puts it, concerns related to ‘creating a distance and imputing negative difference between me/us and others/them’ (88)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Sikes (2005) decided not to story her observations of her visit to a secondary special school for students judged to have emotional and behavioural difficulties for the same reason. As she had not visited the school before, and her descriptions were therefore a “snap-shot”, she was concerned that any attempt to story the experience beyond

### 3.4.2 A creative enquiry into a process of creative enquiry: teacher gossip “writ large”

The story-form highlights the comparisons that can be made between the performance of gossip and the ethnographic process. As Carmel (2011) surmises, drawing on the work of Taylor (1994), both gossip and ethnography are driven by social curiosity, they represent ‘an attempt to understand why people behave the way that they do’ (558).

Much of the gossip-data I collected could be seen to represent a creative enquiry with regards to teachers’ self-constitution within the official “truth” of the secondary school system that they operate in. The two stories represent a process of “creatively (re)working” this data towards deeper understandings of the complex relationship to power that the participants themselves appeared to be creatively (re)working using the gossip speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986) in the first place.

These gossip enquiries are prompted by the controversial actions of an absent other; controversial in the sense that the catalyst for the gossip is often the transgressive behaviour of an absent other - the target of the gossip - that has challenged the gossipers’ understandings of institutional ethical norms. What is important to recognise here is that participants involved in a gossip-event enter into it on the understanding that what is said is likely to be a *creative* retelling of events. It is accepted by the listener that aspects of the gossipers’ story are likely to be exaggerated towards highlighting and exploring the ethics of particular aspects of behaviour within the organisation of the secondary school. In some instances, for example, the object of the gossip I observed was clearly a proxy for the gossipers him or herself who was struggling with the demands of the official discourse and the ways in which they were felt they were being

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applying fictionalisation devices would ‘other’ the participants because it would mean relying too heavily on imagination.

constituted, and consequently sought reassurance that his or her personal knowledge was recognised as a valid contestation of institutional norms towards the shaping of a different “truth”. Other times it was clear that gossip allowed for the emphasis of an ethical conflict through exaggeration, made possible because it is a characteristic of the gossip genre that stories can be embellished for the enjoyment of the listener. Moreover, many of the narratives were communicated quickly as “corridor conversations”, communicated in the brief window of time afforded to teachers between lessons as they walked past one another on their way to different teaching spaces. In these instances, the narratives were reduced to a series of statements (‘have you heard that...’; ‘can you believe that...’) and delivered episodically or “piece-meal”, a consequence of which was that the deviance at the heart of them was often distilled for the listener in a mutually acknowledged and accepted editing of events. My point is that the gossip narratives I recorded were themselves creative distortions, the content of which cannot be trusted in any realist sense.

### *3.4.3 (Re)presenting the incongruences of the social world through a literary retelling*

By adopting a storying methodology, I hope to (re)present the voices of teachers whom, in what MacLure (2010) describes as their ‘perplexing Otherness’, do not always have clear intentions towards existence and whose values are not fixed. Rather than a modernist attempt to uncover a fixed and certain voice spoken by research participants, I hope to be faithful to the competing voices that are present in the gossip narratives I observed. This represents a poststructural move towards ‘a more complete, more nuanced, more complicated hearing’ (Mazzei, 2009: 46) that recognises voice as evasive and changeable, spoken by participants whose fractured identities are in process. I look to record and (re)present the contradictions and discrepancies teachers

attempt to work through with regards to professional identity in the covert stories that they perform to one another.

I propose a literary (re)telling of the gossip-data is therefore more appropriate than a realist or confessional narrative because it is able to contain the multiplicity of things (Speedy, 2008; Van Maanen, 2011); the liminality of the form is able to house the tensions and contradictions created by undetermined teachers in the process of being constituted within the neoliberal discourse. This heeds Stronach and MacLure's (1997: 56-57) warning, which, in its precise summary of this issue, is worth quoting in full:

[n]arratives that promote coherence, singularity and closure, and which aim to set up a cosy camaraderie with the reader, are ultimately conservative and uncritical of prevailing ideological and representational arrangements. If we refuse to 'interrogate' these forms, we run the risk of promoting an uncritical research practice which, in seeming to describe teachers as they 'really are', simply perpetuates whatever iconographies of teacher-hood happen to be circulating in the various professional cultures (research-practitioner, academic) at any given time.

To maintain this sense of multiplicity, I have been mindful not to make sense of the gossip-data in the writing of the two stories, but rather to communicate a sense of the "mess" I observed. This was a determined effort on my part to avoid totalizing (Jackson, 2003) the fractured voices I heard within my own knowing (Lather 2009: 19; MacLure, 2011: 998).

Such contradictory intentions on existence I suggest can be housed within a story through the select use of literary devices. For example, the internal thoughts of a character can be revealed and contradict their dialogue or action in a story; or internal

responses to events in the story can be phrased as questions to communicate a character's uncertainty. To this end, a key literary device that the story-form has afforded me is the “unreliable narrator”; unreliable in the sense that the research-audience is left to determine whether the divergence in what the protagonist thinks, feels, says and does is intentional or otherwise. Kazuo Ishiguro and Jim Crace are both (post)modern authors who utilise this device to explore the ethical conflicts individuals enter into as a consequence of the weight of societal norms. For example, in Ishiguro’s (2010) novel “Never Let Me Go”, the first-person narrator, Kathy, holds a job caring for human clones who have donated their vital organs and are due to “complete”. As a clone herself, you would expect a horrified response to the suffering she witnesses, however there is an uneasy matter-of-factness with which she explains her situation that clearly belies her true feelings. In Crace’s (2014) “Harvest”, the first-person narrator, Walter, reveals his disgust at the way his fellow villagers treat a vagrant family. Walter’s detailed descriptions of the action, however, suggest he was present at said treatment. In both instances the reader is left to wonder to what extent the narration can be relied upon: are the narrators purposefully deceiving us or themselves or both in response the ethical conflicts surrounding their behaviour?

By borrowing such techniques from the literary project, the aim is to open-up unthought of interpretative possibilities in the storied research through resisting the impulse to totalise the teacher-subject.

#### *3.4.4 Widening the site of enquiry*

A story is a less bounded space, freed up from the conventions of academic writing, including the requirement to reach neat conclusions that conform to notions of what has been historically recognised as correct knowledge. Using story within my research

seems appropriate to grasp the conditions that make teacher gossip possible within the institutional rules that define the limits of what is and what is not sayable (Foucault, 1991: 59). As I have already discussed, the subversive and playful nature of gossip make it the site of a potential fissure in neoliberal hegemony: the gossip genre facilitates a critically reflexive process by providing a safe “not to be taken seriously” story-space; participants’ individual cares and concerns are masked by holding the actions of absent others up for scrutiny in place of their own. In this way, the gossip genre provides teachers with a safe site to critically question the dominant discourse and the professional identity it would have them perform. In my storying of the data, the antagonistic gossip-data is “writ-large”. The stories and subsequent commentary are meant as inter-relational: the research-audience is encouraged to play through the process of interpretation and “join in” towards the achievement this aim. This aspiration for my storying accords with what Denzin (1996) believes should be the central purpose of an interpretive ethnographic enquiry. He calls for a social science that goes beyond cultural description to offer cultural critique, suggesting that ethnographic accounts should be more like ‘a symbolic tale, a parable that is not just a record of human experience ... [but also] a story that brings a moral compass back into the readers’ (and the writer’s) lives’ (Denzin, 1996: 748). In particular, and highly pertinent to this study, Denzin cites the need for performative accounts that prompt criticism of ‘elements of the cultural logics of late capitalism’ (Denzin, 1991: 408).

Through the storying of the data I therefore look to invite the research-audience to “continue the conversation” in dialectical interaction with the creative (re)working of the gossip-data. I intend to generate a liminal space (Richardson, 1997; Broadhurst, 1999) that invites the research-audience to critically reflect on the narratives I collected,

the relationship between them, and my relationship to them: an imaginative site in which ‘to extend, provoke and create knowledge in new ways’ (Speedy, 2008: 27).

I look to achieve this by honouring the partial understandings of the participants and participant-researcher. The demarcation of a final “truth” in positivist enquiries necessarily involves the exclusion of alternative interpretations of the data that the researcher has collected (Leavy, 2015: 58); in (re)presenting the data as a fictional story I seek to unbracket my subjectivity as the researcher and make it clear to the research-audience that I write about the truths of the teacher-participants *as I see them* (or rather, *as I saw them* at the time of writing). Stories are self-conscious constructs, in so far as their authors and audience are aware that they reveal as much (if not more) about their author as the events and characters that the author has chosen to write about. My interpretation, realised and articulated in the (re)presentation of the data and subsequent critical commentary, is revealed as perspectival; that is to say I am making it clear that I am storying and analysing the gossip narrative/s from within my prejudices (Schwandt, 2000). As Bell (2002: 210) points out: ‘[s]tories are inherently multilayered and ambiguous, so the constructed nature of truth and the subjectivity of the researcher are particularly evident in this work.’ I therefore contribute to imperialistic practices even as I look to transform them (Lather, 1995: 179). By adopting a more literary mode of (re)presentation I look to acknowledge this failure through my creative (re)working of the data. It is what Kyratzis and Green (1997: 17) refer to as the doubling of the narrative process:

... one that includes the narratives generated by those participating in the research, and one that represents the voice of the researcher as narrator of those narratives.



My fingerprints remain on the research report, so to speak, and this disturbs the promise of representation that the received idea of an ethnographic account appears to offer (Gallagher, 2006: 67).

Further to this, I emphasise for the reader their role as co-author, by offering no easy solutions at the two stories denouement: the protagonists do not victoriously arrive at a complete sense of self. Eco (1962), in a discussion of how the theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht looked to achieve a similar effect through the productive application of ambiguity in his poems and plays, described this aspiration in the following way: the work is left open, he suggests, ‘in the same sense that a debate is “open”... “openness” is converted into an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics’ (31).

I also attempt to draw attention to the limits of my knowing (and the values that inform and are informed by my current understandings) through the employment of overt symbolism. This is a poststructural attempt to render my failings productive. Symbolism is woven into the stories in the creative (re)working of the data as ‘a means to empty out narrative [of meaning] in advance and make it generate itself over its impossibility’ (Lather, 2001: 486).

This conception of story as a strategy to prompt a dialogical relationship between the data, researcher and research-audience, with a view to encourage debate and imagine alternatives (Barone, 2001: 178), represents a move away from propositional knowledge towards a form of data (re)presentation that ‘invites attention to complexity’ (Eisner 2009: 8). It reminds the research-audience to maintain a healthy suspicion towards the retelling of events (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990: 10), promoting an epistemological framework where knowledge is understood not to be fixed (Moen, 2006) and our understandings are always partial and in process (Britzman, 1994).

Whilst I argue for the viability of my interpretation from within the story itself through a rich and revealing interactional description (Denzin, 1989; Polkinghorne, 2007), I also go on to provide a subsequent analytical discussion that relates to the broader sociological themes the stories address. Clough (2002) argues that the inclusion of such an analysis undermines the application of the story-form in education research by negating the research-audience's interpretative role. He asserts that research stories should stand alone in their richness. I am not convinced. Whilst I agree that the story-form provides the space for unanticipated openings and possibilities brought about by this relationship between the story and the research-audience, the inclusion of a critical commentary does not have to close off interpretive alternatives, rather it can create further dialogical opportunities if the reader disagrees with the interpretation of the researcher-author. The critical commentary I provide acts as a reasoned extrapolation and extension of the themes and ideas that the stories address in relation to wider social research. It is not a reductionist retelling of the stories in a formal register that purports to extract definitive meaning from the rich and multi-layered literary mode therefore undermining its application, rather it is a 'response': the story is being put to work in the context of a wider sociological context (Sikes, 2005). As Hytten (2004) discusses in relation to the prioritising of participant voice, if the researcher does not connect teacher-participants' local experiences to analysis of the social structures they function within, the possibility of ethnographic research serving an emancipatory function is undermined. The inclusion of the commentary is therefore my attempt to avoid prioritising participant accounts of their constitution - albeit already storied - to the detriment of an examination of how and why they are constituted in the way that they are (Mayo 2000: 105).

Perhaps the commentary also highlights how, despite my claims to be putting poststructural theory to work, I am still haunted by ‘a desire for clarity and meaning’ (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009: 6). This ontological tug-of-war is interesting in and of itself, and I hope it infuses this study with a further degree of scepticism towards my employment of experimental qualitative research practices: are they really taking me towards the margins of the neoliberal regime of truth (Foucault, 1980a: 131) as I would like to believe? How caught up am I in an individualist neoliberal mode of thinking? I would not be arrogant enough to suggest that I have somehow achieved the impossible and that my research evades being discursively situated (you only have to glance at the contents page and the traditional structure of a doctoral thesis proudly presented there to recognise that this is indeed not the case!) In other words, I hope to learn from how my methodology falls short - and always will - in my attempt to be critical. McWilliam et al (2009) likewise recognise the benefit of unsuccessfully working the limits of what is currently accepted as qualitative research, that is the ‘taken-for-granted knowledges through which we produce ourselves as researchers’ (ibid: 72). Perhaps more generously than myself, they describe the educational researcher’s recognition of methodological failure as an ‘instructive complication’ (ibid: 73).

### ***3.5 Emotion: an important but oft-overlooked data set***

How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments in life?  
How to embody in language the mix of heightened awareness and felt  
experience? ... You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system  
of ideas. You do it with a story (Coles in Trahar, 2011: xv).

In this, the final section of Methodology chapter, I argue for the importance of regarding emotion as a valuable source of data. I offer examples of how, through the use of expressive literary devices, I seek to engage with emotion as an important ‘extra-scientific dimension’ (Williams, 2014). Further to this, I discuss how I have been careful to make my narrativisations of the field evocative rather than empathetic to avoid an imposition of understandings of experience.

### *3.5.1 Why report the temperature when you are interested in exploring the “affect” of the heat? Employing expressive literary devices to communicate participant feeling*

The above subtitle paraphrases Eisner (2009), who champions evocation in qualitative research as opposed to denotation. He argues that grappling with emotion in the recording and (re)presentation of field data will lead to a closer and more informed understanding of the complexities of the social world. He argues that by ignoring emotion in the field you reduce what can be usefully known. In recent years the critical social sciences have taken what Clough (2007) refers to as an ‘affective turn’ and are experimenting with ways to (re)present and analyse how affect is involved in the complex relationship dynamic between history, power and politics (Athanasίου et al, 2009; Rice, 2008; Zembylas, 2018).

Ahmed (2013) defines the relational production of affect as an orienting device, involving ‘(re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to ...objects’’ (8). In other words, based on how we feel - which is socially mediated - we move towards or away from a particular worldview. Affect is likely, therefore, to play a significant role in securing teachers’ compliance towards the model of professionalism that the neoliberal project in education would have them perform. I have already discussed Ball (2003) and Stevenson and Wood’s (2013) suggestion that fear is

involved in incentivising teachers to perform as neoliberal subjects, exactly how and to what extent this is the case in a localised context I intend to explore. However, I am also interested to ascertain if and how other emotions are relationally produced to secure compliance on the level of the teacher-subject.

I contend that a (re)presentation of a participant narrative should therefore attempt to reflect this. I apply expressive literary devices to convey the affect involved in local teacher relations for subsequent critical analysis on the level of the social (i.e. how affect elements are attached to the social, historical, cultural and/or political).

This is meant as a mindful challenge to the assumption that science, as opposed to art, provides the data to understand the social world. A situation that Vadeboncoeur & Collie (2013: 209) explains has come about since the Enlightenment because there is a tendency to privilege the psychological processes seen to relate to rationalist ideals.

To offer an example of how the inclusion and consideration of the affective in teacher relations might inform new understandings I return to the interpretative possibilities I offered previously with regards to the protagonist's behaviour in the first story. In light of emotional considerations, a broader and more sympathetic interpretation is made possible. It might be that he is responding to his teaching practice being regarded as less effective than NQT's: the protagonist believes that his pedagogy should be rooted in social justice, whereas the leadership team and his own students appear to want him to narrow his teaching of the curriculum to furnish them with the specific knowledge (or "knowledge capital") to succeed in their coursework. Within this new interpretation, the protagonist's whistle-blowing can be read as a symbolic gesture aimed at the neoliberal project in education itself, which is personified in the never (but ever) present character of NQT. Following the logic of this interpretation, the protagonist's actions could be recognised to be driven - or regulated even - by a number

of *feelings*: inadequacy in the face of a new ideology in education; anger towards what he recognises as his depleted role as a teacher; or jealousy towards his younger colleague, whom appears to be succeeding in an educational climate that he himself is struggling to acclimatise to.

Accepting that the instrumental language used in the service of the norms of rationality is insufficient, the expressive devices I draw on to incorporate affect into my storying of the gossip-data include: symbolism; making explicit that the first-person teacher narrators' observations are coloured by emotion; and revealing the narrator's attempts to understand their feelings through the presentation of internal monologue in italics. In the first story, for example, I use "heat" metaphorically to attempt to communicate to the research-audience a sense of the pressure - and accompanying feeling of nausea - the protagonist experiences to adopt the neoliberal model of professional identity. In the second story, I hope to communicate how smell and sight and sound combine in dynamic relationship to create sensations of disgust and shame that the protagonist experiences when she recognises her role in securing the exclusion of a student. I look to achieve the communication of this 'embodied experience' (MacLure, 2011: 1003) through the teacher's first-person description of the 'sickly-sweet' smell of the grass cuttings as she searches for her superior on the school field. I also reveal the character's thinking - in italics - that her general feeling of disgust is making her 'stomach lurch'. Incomplete sentences and ellipses mark for the reader that she is struggling to articulate her thoughts due to this feeling in the subsequent conversation she has with her superior.

### *3.5.2 Considering the feeling of others rather than owning them*

Whilst I have argued for emotion as a valuable form of data that should be included in enquiries that seek to illuminate the contingency of teacher identity, it is important to

think about the feelings researchers in education write about<sup>26</sup>. I do not wish to undermine my enquiry's critical intentions by offering a 'feeling fix' (Berlant, 2011) that does not interrogate how emotion itself is a discursive construct (Zembylas, 2003). Emotion, valorised in this way, can eclipse the sociological intent of an enquiry. I will now discuss how I looked to prevent this from happening in my own writing.

Just as I refused to empathise with the participants' experiences as voiced, so as not to risk idealizing and totalizing their experiences (Jackson, 2003) from within my own knowing, I have looked to adopt a style of writing in the two stories that aims to interrupt the research-audience's empathetic engagement (and the persuasion inherent in it) as a result of emotional identification. This accords with Ellis's (2000) thinking, who asserts that a well written narrative should be able to simultaneously engage a reader's feeling and thinking capacities<sup>27</sup>.

I have looked to moderate the (re)presentation of feelings so that the personal does not subsume the social aspects of the enquiry. Perhaps most significantly, I have looked to build on the playfulness in the gossip narratives I observed. To begin with I questioned whether humour was misplaced in stories charting teachers' ethical quandaries as they fail to resist performing as a neoliberal subject. However, I wanted to remain faithful to the transgressive character of the data I collected in the field (the "gallows humour" I identified in the gossip narratives I observed and participated in). The overall tone of the research stories I have written might therefore be best described as melancholic. As Calvino (2009: 19) suggests, melancholy, which is a sadness

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<sup>26</sup> Stern (2012) points out, 'the ascent of a sentimental surplus in excess of ideology critique is itself symptomatic of the neoliberal conjuncture'. His argument is that when we cannot think our way out of present circumstances we feel instead and that this might explain the rise in the social sciences in the production of emotive confessional narratives.

<sup>27</sup> Ellis is specifically championing the use of Autoethnography here.

lightened, ‘casts doubt on the self, on the world, and on the whole network of relationships at stake’. He goes on to argue that melancholy is able to contain the multiplicity of things: ‘it does not take itself too seriously and yet it talks of serious matters; it can harbour confused thoughts or emotions whilst making its purpose clear’ (ibid). This perhaps goes some way towards achieving the postspectacular, dedramatized story Berlant (2011) and Lather (2013) call for; ‘a deflationary aesthetic that points to the insecurity of knowing’ (Lather, 2013: 640).

A further device I have employed to remind the research-audience to take a (cognitively) active role is to interrupt the flow of the narrative. A beautiful and troubling example of how this can be achieved is Lather and Smithies (1997) *Troubling the Angels*, a poststructural work that explores women living with HIV/AIDS. The text refuses easy identifications, and the women’s stories are not told in linear fashion. Inspired by how this work has been structured, I use flashback (in the form of first-person recollection) in both stories. In the second story, for example, I begin by having the protagonist describe a serious incident that occurs in her classroom before providing the context (or backstory). By so doing I hope to establish from the outset that the research-audience should mine the story for understanding (in other words, I look to provide them a question to think about: ‘what circumstances led to this altercation between a teacher and student?’)

The aim is for an account to be evocative, so as to offer the research-audience an insight into the feelings of the participants, but to avoid affecting the audience to the preclusion of sociological criticality. Within the social sciences and education field, the beautifully crafted stories of Clough (2002) and Reed (2012) act as exemplars. Both employ similar techniques to achieve this, including, most notably, directly addressing and questioning their research-audience. Their research stories are at turns deeply



affecting and thought provoking and, as a result, resonate long after you finish reading them. Surely an aim any educational researcher would wish for if their purpose is to contribute to change.

### ***3.6 Methodological summary***

I have stressed the importance to this enquiry of moving away from the romanticised conception of the speaking subject as singular and transparent, suggesting that this renders a representation of teacher identity as static. I have argued that, through engagement with the creative playfulness of teachers' gossip, I hope to access the *in between* of teacher identity to better understand why teachers concede to a neoliberal model of professional identity. I have theorised teacher gossip as a site where teachers monitor themselves in relation to others in an effort to understand how they are constituted. This playful working through of the ethics of self-constitution means, however, that the authenticity of a narrator's voice cannot be relied on by the research-audience; indeed, it is important to this research that it is not: the contradictions and compromises of teachers' subjective struggle *represent the proposed site of enquiry*. However, if the authenticity of the narrators' voice, as evidenced by certainty and transparency, cannot be relied on, by what criteria am I asking my research-audience to judge the effectiveness of the storied accounts?

I have discussed a number of aspirations for my storied research which I believe would make useful criteria by which to evaluate its effectiveness. Firstly, I hope to prompt dialogic engagement with the research-audience to widen the site of enquiry to include the research-audience in an ongoing counter-critical project to destabilise the "truth" of the neoliberal project in education. Secondly, and to this end, I strive to balance critical and empathetic responses in my research-audience; by this I mean I look

to craft a narrative using expressive literary techniques that, on the one hand, are immersive in their evocation (in other words encourages the reader to draw close to the social relations under scrutiny, including the teacher-participants' feelings); whilst, on the other hand, through the select use of "distancing" devices, I look to prompt the reader to critically question the narrative perspective, particularly any humanist tendencies I might have inadvertently acted on towards the totalising of the participant as subject (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Thirdly, and in relation to this previous point about the appropriation of experience, I seek to acknowledge my partiality and politics as a (post)critical educational researcher.

These aspirations for my storied research accord with Richardson's (2000: 254) criteria for ethnographic narratives, which include: the impact the narrative causes the reader; the degree to which a narrative expresses a reality; and the reflexivity demonstrated by the researcher. Further to these, Richardson also suggests that ethnographic narratives should offer a substantive contribution to the field and hold aesthetic merit. The former I look to make explicit in relation to the wider literature in the subsequent critical commentary. The latter I recognise to be evident in the successful crafting of the stories to meet all previous criteria whilst maintaining an overall sense of flow and tension (in order to sustain a reader's enjoyment and interest).

## **4 Findings Part 1: Two uncertain stories of teacher identity**

### ***4.1 Introduction***

In this chapter I go on to experiment with storying the gossip-data I have collected in the field. The following two short stories are fictional (re)presentations of the teacher gossip I experienced (both as observer and participant). As I made clear in my Methodology chapter, the two stories should be regarded as a (post)critical experiment in storying strategically collected ethnographic data in education research. They are an attempt to illustrate how gossip can function for teachers as a discursive tool to critically interrogate ‘those boundaries and dividing lines that make the normative prevailing discourses legitimate’ (Leach, 2000: 231). To this end, written ‘from the ground level, from the point of view of what the situated individuals see, feel, hear and say’ (Denzin, 1990: 5), the reader is positioned as the main recipient of the teacher-narrator’s “gossip”. As a creative (re)presentation of how two individual teachers work through the ethics of self-constitution using gossip, the contradictions they encounter and the compromises they make are brought to the fore.

Through the storying process, I have sought to grasp the conditions that make teacher gossip possible within the institutional rules that define the limits of what is and what is not sayable (Foucault, 1991: 59). In other words, as covert conversation "writ-large" the stories function as a critique of the operations of power that enable their emergence. The stories look to highlight for analysis through what techniques and effects of power the neoliberal teacher identity that the teacher-participants are resistant to is made desirable such that they actively take it up as their own.

My findings are made apparent through the self-conscious crafting of the storied (re)presentations, by this I mean the selection, sorting and analysis of the data. What becomes clear is how the teacher-participants in the stories are incentivised in

particularly insidious ways to contribute the maintenance of the neoliberal project in education and the social injustice it perpetuates. I go on to discuss these findings in relation to the wider sociological literature in the following chapter.

## ***4.2 Story 1: Notwithstanding the Heat***

### *4.2.1 Record temperatures*

If we're talking record temperatures then July 2018 would surely take the prize: that summer there was the ongoing debate about introducing a maximum temperature limit in the workplace, and I remember every time you turned on the television another news bulletin updated you on the progress of the wild fires sweeping across the South West. England never seems to fare well in extremes of temperature. But we'd almost made it! Only one week left to endure before the end of the school year.

I was on my way to see my Senior Leadership Team (SLT) department link. I remember I took a convoluted route across the school site in order to remain out of the sun, hopping from the shade of one building to the next. The school had recently joined a chain of academies, and I noticed, due to the extreme temperatures, the logo, newly stencilled on the side of the prefab classrooms, was already beginning to peel.

There was a different atmosphere in the school altogether since the heatwave hit. Hell to some and heaven to others, the relentless sun proved to be highly illuminating in its divisiveness. On duty at lunchtime, I'd watched with interest as one member of staff berated a group of Year 9 boys for rolling up their trousers whilst another turned a blind eye. Some staff allowed students out of their lessons to fill up their water bottles whilst others refused, holding steadfast tight to the rules. What was certain is that the pace of learning in the school had slowed to a crawl. Other than the scavenging seagulls, who seemed impervious to the oppressive heat, the large playing fields remained deserted

due to the decision to cancel P.E. lessons. As I walked past the columns of open windows, the soundtracks to films – only tenuously linked to the curriculum - blared from the classrooms of those teachers who had decided it was too hot for students to concentrate on anything else (a decision, I should add, that was in violation of a hastily e-mailed directive from the Head teacher in response to a parental complaint).

Quite honestly, when I think back to those last few weeks in July, any sense any of us - parents, staff, and students - could make of the whole endeavour had almost entirely melted away.

#### *4.2.2 A degree of entitlement*

My meeting with SLT that day was to discuss the behaviour of the Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) in my department. At twenty-two years old and fresh out of university, NQT was often mistaken by other staff at the school as an A-level student. He had thick dark hair, slicked back to create a boyband quiff, and unblinking blue eyes that appeared to focus ever-so-slightly beyond you. He came across in his interview as cool and competent. His manner certainly impressed the Head Teacher.

As NQT's Head of Department and mentor I was required to observe him teach several lessons each term in order to offer him guidance and advice. How best to describe NQT's relationship with his students? Well, for want of a better word, I'd say that there existed a mutual "adoration", the sort that has more to do with validation than respect if that makes any sense. His lesson plans read like scripts, amusing and informative, which he enjoyed performing for his classes. And he rarely deviated from what he had planned, despite the students' contributions. The majority of students appeared to appreciate his enthusiastic delivery and, ready consumers, were happy to take the path of least resistance and avoid the effort required to think. His ability to hold

a class's attention for an entire lesson served to validate a sense he had of himself as charismatic. Indeed, I overheard him tell a member of support staff that he felt like he was his best self when he was in front of a class, and that he wished his ex-girlfriend were able to see him in that context.

The students dutifully reflected NQT's image of himself back to him. They laughed at his jokes and sat in awed silence when he read a particularly dramatic excerpt from the book they were studying. Any thoughts or feelings the students aired that aligned with his own beliefs NQT referred to as 'ace' and rewarded with a merit sticker, or a postcard home, or chocolate treat. Students who were not won over by the strength of NQT's personality were compliant in so far as they were quiet and produced the minimum amount of work required in order not to receive a sanction. These students had learnt early on that NQT's apparent warm manner could quickly turn cold if he suspected you were indifferent towards his charms.

The unfortunate upshot of all this was that NQT struggled to accept constructive criticism with regards to how to improve his practice. He couldn't understand why I didn't appear to adore him like his students did. He declined to enter into any sort of dialogue after a lesson observation, opting instead to glare at me - or rather, just beyond. A typical feedback session would play out something like this:

I'd begin by commending him on his classroom presence, particularly his inspirational oratory exposition. I'd then attempt to drill down to pedagogic principles in order to try to encourage him to consider how he might move beyond instructional delivery. I'd ask him something along the lines of: 'how could you structure a lesson to encourage the students to take more responsibility for their own learning?'

'Are we done?' NQT would retort. 'My classes are happy and engaged.'

‘That’s all very good,’ I’d persevere, ‘but what I’d like to discuss is the nature of the tasks you set.’

‘Yeah, yeah...’ he’d say and walk away.

I also had concerns about NQT’s relationship with some of the older students he taught, for example when he offered to talk through career options with his A-level English class. A generous offer on the face of it, his ‘tutorials’ with the students would sometimes last for hours: adolescent crises were dwelt upon in the most self-indulgent way, to my mind anyway. When I raised the inappropriateness of these conversations with him I tried to reassure him that it was not uncommon for young teachers at the start of their career to worry about the older students not taking them seriously, and to therefore overcompensate by either being too brusque and stand-offish, or, like NQT, too friendly.

‘Neither strategy leads to a healthy teacher-learner relationship’, I explained.

‘Perhaps it would help to think of them as Year 11 in jeans...’

NQT nodded, unblinkingly. It was difficult to know how much of what you said he took on board when he looked through you like that. Apparently not much. At least not on that occasion, as, two days later, I caught him showing two Year 13 girls a tattoo on his leg. I advised him to re-read the school’s child protection policy.

It wasn’t only me who struggled to communicate with NQT. The way he spoke to other colleagues in the English department was equally discourteous and frosty. I remember, soon after his arrival, I had to ask him to apologise for the unprofessional way he spoke to my Second in Department. She had been talking him through the department’s schemes of work.

‘Is that all there is?’ he asked, flicking through the Year 7 folder.

‘I don’t understand?’ she said.

‘Well where are the lesson plans?’

‘Oh, I see. The schemes are quite detailed. We don’t want to be over prescriptive,’ she explained. ‘You can cover the topics however you like as long as it allows students to develop the skills highlighted ...’

Something about this offended NQT.

‘You want me to fail, don’t you!’

‘No. Not at all. We share our ideas and resources all the time and I’m happy to talk you through-’

‘Stop lying to me!’

On another occasion a different member of the department, who shared a class with NQT, spoke to me about how she felt her authority in the classroom was being repeatedly undermined by him. Apparently NQT would discuss with the students how he disagreed with the sanctions she’d issued.

\*

I suppose the real nastiness began after I had to tell NQT to never, ever sign off an email to a student with a kiss. I tried my best to explain to him that - no matter how innocently meant or absentmindedly employed - such things could be easily misinterpreted. This advice did not go down well at all with NQT. He shouted something about my obstructive nature and made a show of storming out of the office.

After that NQT refused to talk to anyone in the English department, including during our department meetings: he’d sit, somewhat haughtily, absorbed in introspection, picking at the eczema on his hands.



Although I flagged up NQT's increasingly bizarre behaviour on a number of occasions, both with his Professional Tutor (PT) and SLT, I got the distinct impression that they thought I should be able to manage the situation myself. It therefore came as a relief - in a way - to discover that NQT had contravened the examination board's guidance for conducting controlled assessment. Does that make me a bad person?

#### *4.2.3 The weight of accountability*

SLT's low-ceilinged office smelt of stale deodorant. Circling flies hummed hotly. A laptop computer choked on itself in the corner.

It had been difficult to arrange an official meeting with SLT. His preferred on-the-hoof methods of communication: corridor conversations, or impromptu discussions in the toilet (enough to make anyone dry-up).

'Thank you for seeing me,' I said, 'I'm unsure how to proceed...'

SLT kept sniffing and wiping his nose.

'Damn hayfever,' he said.

I passed him NQT's students' work. The sweat on my back began prickle. I resisted the urge to scratch.

'He's offered them more guidance than he's allowed to,' I explained.

SLT took some time to flick through the students' work. He wore a grimace on his face and continually shifted his weight.

'Right,' he said finally, and sat back heavily. 'Give me a moment to think this over...'

The sunlight transluenced through the slatted wooden window blinds highlighting an inordinate amount of dancing-dust in the air. The strips of paper attached to a desk fan went tickedy-tickedy-tickedy.

I noticed SLT's features were more flushed than usual. Sunburn perhaps?

Despite the hot weather he continued to wear his polyester suit and large damp patches had formed under the arms and around the crotch. He began massaging his scalp, his habit when faced with a situation he'd rather avoid. It was common staffroom knowledge that SLT had sought promotion from his previous post as Head of Maths out of necessity rather than desire: his three children had - somewhat inconsiderately - decided to go to university. We were friends once, having joined the staff in the same academic year. Not anymore.

'Promotion can be lethal; climbing forever upwards over our own dead selves.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I said: this situation is awful; it's a serious allegation to make. You need to be sure of yourself...' SLT said.

I stared into the blazing puddles of sunlight on the carpet and wondered again if I was doing the right thing.

'Look now how it crushes you!'

'Sorry?'

'I said: I don't want to rush you but I have a meeting with a parent in half-an-hour,' said SLT, 'a stage four exclusion. Are you all right?'

'Yes. Of course. It's this heat-'

'Interminable isn't it.'

'You can't escape it.'

'Quite. Look, NQT is clearly ambitious and wants to do his best-'

'Incentivised in the wrong way I'd say...'

I leaned over to point out some specific comments NQT had scribbled in pencil in the margins of a student's work. 'According to the examination board students are

not supposed to be given the opportunity to draft their work, let alone receive feedback from a teacher. Simple prompt questions during controlled time are the only guidance we're allowed to offer.'

'And have you explained to NQT the procedures for conducting controlled conditions?' SLT asked.

'We've discussed it at length as a department'

'And there's evidence to support that is there?'

The battle to think clearly in the oppressive heat was exhausting. Not wanting my purpose to become muddled, I redoubled my efforts to concentrate.

'There are the minutes of our department meetings,' I said, 'and there's also the revised department handbook you advised me to write earlier in the year...'

'Surely this can be put down to professional immaturity on NQT's part,' SLT interrupted, checking his watch on the sly by pretending to straighten his cuffs. 'Have you tried adopting a different management style with him? More direct, perhaps, and less agreeable?'

'I couldn't care less if NQT thinks badly of me!'

I was taken aback by the vehemence in my voice. SLT nodded as though some private suspicion had been clarified. It made me want to hit him.

'Look,' I continued, more carefully, 'I have been trying to coach NQT, offer him constructive criticism, but-'

'I'm sure you've done your best. Could you say, though, hand on heart, that you sufficiently tailored your training programme to meet his needs?'

'This is ridiculous-'

'Is it?'

‘I know the difference between ignorance and disregard, and I’m telling you his behaviour is clearly born of the latter.’ I felt something similar to panic rising in my chest. ‘There is a massive mismatch of values somewhere here...’

‘You’re aware that NQT has levelled several complaints against you and your team.’

‘Yes.’

‘He says he’s been made to feel ostracised. That he has had to resort to working in the sixth form common room because he no longer feels welcome in the English office.’

‘That’s preposterous.’

‘Is it?’

‘Of course it is! Why wouldn’t he work in the staff room, for goodness sake?’

‘So you accept you’ve made him feel unwelcome in the English office.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

SLT wiped the sweat from his eyebrows and changed tack.

‘The joint lesson observation you conducted with the deputy head-‘

‘Yes?’

‘He was very impressed by NQT’s practice. In fact, he said he’d never seen a better-behaved class.’

‘You know as well as I do that good behaviour management doesn’t necessarily equate to a sound pedagogical approach-’

‘True. But the data tells a different story. NQT has achieved some of the best results in your team...’

‘By breaking the rules,’ I said gesturing again towards the students’ work in SLT’s hand.

‘Perhaps in this *single* instance. Are you aware there have been requests from parents to transfer their son or daughter from your English class into his? I've received an email. Katie Boardman's mother?’

I wasn't aware of this, but it didn't surprise me. Katie had stayed behind after class to ask me for support to access top band marks: ‘Why can't you just tell us what to write?’ she'd asked. And after I told her she was supposed to be articulating her own opinion in her coursework and not mine, she went on to ask: ‘but which opinion is worth the most marks? Don't you care what grades we get? Mr. NQT helps his class...’

Indeed, it was because of this exchange I felt I had no choice but to investigate the level of support NQT offered his class. Reluctantly, I looked through the students' coursework in the box file on his desk. I had to wait a long time because NQT liked to make a show of leaving later than the rest of us. It was immediately apparent that he'd given his students an inappropriate level of support; he'd rewritten whole paragraphs in the margins of their work. On some of the work he'd even made his intention for them to copy what he'd written explicit: “Rahul make sure to USE MY WORDS”. My heart sunk. Truly it did. Up until that moment, despite the rudeness, some part of me still thought perhaps I was doing NQT an injustice – that his behaviour was unprofessional by my standards alone.

‘I feel like we're straying from the point-’ I said.

‘Are we?’ SLT lent back in his chair and searched the ceiling for the right phrasing. ‘I wonder what goes on in other schools... how do they go about conducting controlled assessments? How strictly do they adhere to the guidance? Especially in the private sector.’

‘What's that got to do with anything?’

‘Nothing. You're right. It's a problem of parity, that's all. We all want the best for our students. Well don't we?’

I'd heard enough. The frustration fell from my lips in a torrent:

‘Don't you think too much time and energy has been spent on NQT already? It's exhausting! The whole dynamic of the department has shifted to accommodate him. I've put support strategies in place to support the support strategies. Only it's never enough! My own teaching has suffered as a result. The entire English team walk on eggshells, worried NQT will misconstrue what we say as some sort of persecution. It's an awful atmosphere to work in. He's taken this ridiculous passive-aggressive stance. You wouldn't put up with it from a child!’

We reflected on this.

‘Look,’ I continued, ‘I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job-’

‘Clearly you are...’

‘No. I'm not. However as Head of Department it is my responsibility to ensure that the staff I line-manage meet certain professional standards. I wouldn't be doing my job properly otherwise. NQT has crossed a professional line. This is different to the other incidents.’

‘Ah, yes. The “incident log”...’

After raising NQT's unprofessionalism with SLT in the past and being ignored, I decided to begin logging specific concerns: dates, times, witnesses etc. I'm not a pedant, honestly I'm not, but under the circumstances I felt I had no alternative.

SLT looked to access the incident log for us to refer to, huffing and puffing and rubbing his sweaty head again when the computer failed to do as it was told.

As SLT did battle with his computer my gaze wandered outside. I noticed the site-team had installed sprinklers on the playing fields. The jets of cold water were thrown in the air, back and forth, back and forth. Tantalising cool...

‘You know, on the continent,’ I said, absentmindedly, ‘they accept that the grass will turn yellow in the summer.’

‘What was that?’

‘Oh, nothing. I just said that on the continent-’

‘I’m well aware schools close for siesta during the hottest part of the day on the continent,’ snapped SLT, ‘I’ve been reminded of that several times already today. We are *not* closing the school.’

I tried to explain that this wasn’t what I’d been getting at, but SLT moved the conversation on.

‘Many of these incidents here,’ he said thumbing through the printout, ‘read like minor misunderstandings which should have been resolved in-department, either at the time they occurred or during NQT’s interim appraisal.’

‘And they were.’

‘Well then I fail to see their relevance...’

‘It’s an overview. Don’t you see? It was only a matter of time. His behaviour has been leading up to this incident.’

SLT shrugged and took a slurp from a large bottle of water. ‘It could come across as though you are being petty.’

‘I’ve worked at this school for ten years. I like to think I have earned a reputation for fastidiousness and fair-mindedness-’

'Yes of course. I've often fought your corner at leadership meetings. I respect you as a practitioner. You're value driven. A bit too – how shall I put it? - *cerebral* at times...'

'Has something been said about me in a leadership meeting?' I asked.

'Something derogatory?'

'What? No, no, no. Nothing specific anyway. It's just all this business between you and NQT. Some of the leadership team - not me you understand - are beginning to wonder if you have some sort of grudge against him?'

'A grudge? I just want him to do his job properly. What grudge?'

'Professional jealousy perhaps? You can see how this might look like a bit of a witch hunt,' he said waving the incident log in front of me.

'Not at all.'

'The leadership team have quite a different impression of NQT: besides the outstanding results and exceptional behaviour management, he's volunteered to deliver several assemblies this year to discuss his charity work; he's also signed up to lead the "tackling workload" working party next year; and he has asked how he might helpfully contribute to the School-direct training programme for new teachers. I have the Head comment on how he recognises himself in NQT - his entrepreneurial spirit - and he's supporting NQT's application for the Future Leaders programme.'

'OhmyGod.'

'You need to understand that if you choose to continue down this path-'

'This is me officially reporting an episode of misconduct.'

A definite silence.

'Is this your way of punishing me?' asked SLT.

I stared at him, agog.



‘You hate that I’ve been promoted before you, don’t you,’ he continued, eyebrows raised and smirking, ever-so-slightly.

‘What on earth are you talking about? The last thing I would want - the very last thing - would be to wear your suit.’

This wiped the smile off his face.

‘We’re all tired. It’s been a long year. We’re saying things we don’t mean.’

‘He’s CHEATED!’

The words hung heavy in the hot air.

An expression similar to disgust crossed SLT’s face. ‘You’re aware this will mean the students will have to complete the work again. The whole cohort. Think how that’s going to reflect on the academy, how it could negatively impact on student enrolment next year...’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re happy to bring Ofsted down on your colleagues?’

‘No of course not, but-’

‘And you’re prepared to accept the personal consequences I assume? You’re NQT’s Head of Department after all. There will be tricky questions to answer: why, for example, did you not intervene earlier? How are you going to justify jeopardising the department results when it comes to your own appraisal and pay review? Have you thought about that?’

‘Have you?’

SLT didn’t like this. He didn’t like this one little bit. It sent him into a sneezing frenzy. He grabbed for his handkerchief.

‘Gesundheit,’ I said.

And then: ‘Gesundheit,’ once more.

After replacing the handkerchief in his pocket, SLT looked directly at me. I held his gaze. His bloodshot eyes were brim-full of loathing. The clockwork of the antiquated bell that marked the end of one lesson and the beginning of another went clunk on the corridor-side of the office wall and the bell began to ring.

‘Look,’ I said finally, over the rising sound of student footsteps, ‘this is bigger than us. I’m trying to do the right thing.’

‘NQT will likely face a disciplinary. This could end his career before it has begun, you realise that...’

I nodded, reticently.

SLT swivelled his chair back around to face his computer screen and began tapping angrily at the keyboard.

‘So we’re decided then..?’ I asked.

‘What choice do I have,’ he snorted.

#### *4.2.4 A victory in retreat*

I wanted to say to SLT before I left how I thought the whole sorry mess was inevitable. How having allowed value to displace values we were beginning to reap what we’d sown. After all, NQT knew nothing other than the logic of competition.

*But honestly, what difference would it make? I thought. At least my conscience is clear.*

I bumped into a colleague in the corridor outside SLT’s office and tried to give across the energy and good humour I’d once been renowned for. I received short shrift.

I walked out of the administration block into the furnace of the afternoon.

*The end of the school day, the school year, my teaching career can’t come soon enough, I thought.*

Through the open window of the print room I caught the end of a radio news bulletin: fire teams had taken to dampening the wild brush in the local area in a bid to prevent the wildfires spreading.

Towards the end of my walk back across the school site I spotted a group of Year 12 students lounging in the sun.

*They're trying it on, I thought.*

It was the same every year. After the Year 13 students finish their final exams the Year 12 students find they are left with the keys to the kingdom: free reign of the vending machines; the choice of what music to play in the common room; and of course access to the prime picnicking spot, a small triangular patch of grass outside the front of the sixth form block. The lure of these new privileges created a degree of tardiness.

I was about to play killjoy and tell the sixth-form-sunbathers to hurry along to class when I noticed they were with a member of staff. NQT sat amongst them. Laughing.

### ***4.3 Story 2: Sacrificial Lambs***

#### *4.3.1 Victim of circumstance*

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ Rainbow sneered, her logic unfathomable.

The irony that she now held the class hostage by barricading the door, having spent much of the year making it clear she did not want to be in my GCSE Dance class was not lost on me. The other students stood stock still; partly in shock no doubt, but also curious to see how this would all play out.

Rainbow’s bottomless eyes stared and stared and stared.

My stomach cramped, and I struggled for breath.

But I’m getting ahead of myself...

\*

I had discovered GCSE Dance had not recruited the requisite – seemingly arbitrary – minimum number of ten students in the Year 9 options process several minutes ahead of the hastily arranged all-staff meeting.

‘The school is experiencing funding difficulties,’ the Head Teacher had explained to an auditorium of po-faced staff, ‘and therefore teachers need to be stood in front of larger classes. I wanted to reassure you all that I will not be making redundancies. Not yet.’

*Thirty-eight*, I thought. It was the number of afterschool and weekend rehearsals and performances I had been involved with that academic year.

Following the announcement, a promotional frenzy had begun. Teachers of GCSE optional subjects aggressively sold the merits of their courses to Year 9 students at any given opportunity. I wasn’t brave enough to manufacture a situation where I could address an assembly like some, but I did begin to target individual Year 9 students at the end of their Dance lessons: ‘I hope you are considering opting for Dance next year, you’ve clearly got the talent,’ I would tell them. It was particularly upsetting to hear from some of those students that other members of staff were actively dissuading them from considering Dance: suggesting, for example, it lacked academic rigour and therefore would not contribute to a successful university application in the future.

After much argument over the proceeding weeks - and surreptitiously garnering the support of a number of parents at parents evening (‘if you are particularly unhappy

about your son/daughter not being able to take Dance at GCSE,’ I told them, ‘perhaps it would be best to write to the Head Teacher about it?’) - I managed to engineer a compromise: Dance would run, but only as an afterschool “fast-track” GCSE option. Whilst I was pleased that I had secured the survival of Dance at GCSE level (albeit in a reduced capacity), I found myself in the impossible situation of being expected to deliver the same course content in considerably less time. Thankfully, I discovered that the majority of the fifteen fifteen-year-olds who traipsed dutifully into the changing rooms every Friday afternoon attended the same Dance club outside of school and, this being the case, were instantly at ease with one another.

Then Rainbow arrived.

#### *4.3.2 Learning interrupted*

As a non-compulsory GCSE course run afterschool, there was no reason for Rainbow to continue to attend the class. And yet... there she was, without fail, wallowing in vitriol at the far end of the dance studio; lesson after lesson; week after week.

*Why does she put herself through it?* I often wondered.

Rainbow had been diagnosed with ‘oppositional defiance disorder’ and her teachers had been asked to avoid taking an authoritative stance: ‘Rainbow can respond aggressively to direct authority,’ her Individual Education Plan (IEP) said.

‘Are you getting changed today, Reyna?’ I would ask, careful to use the name she preferred to go by (and woe betide anyone who tried otherwise!)

‘I haven’t got my kit today,’ she’d invariably growl.

‘Well remove your shoes then...’

I’d stopped issuing Rainbow official warnings for arriving late to the lesson without her dance kit since her mother had informed me (in one of our many telephone

conversations): ‘you can’t expect her to get changed with those other girls – she has developed body-issues. The Deputy Head Teacher assured me he had e-mailed all her teachers about this...’ Which also explained why Rainbow did not appear to have followed the school dress code, I supposed. I often caught sight of her around the school site in skinny jeans.

Rainbow spent much of the hour-long-lessons staring at nothing-in-particular on the dance studio ceiling or checking her hair for split ends. That is until, upon emitting a low groan to signify the strain, she’d prop herself up on one elbow to launch a perfectly crafted insult. Each cruel comment efficaciously undermined the - seemingly arbitrary - target’s self-esteem, paralysing their ability to learn. Or, in my case, the ability to teach.

Sad to say, the other students in the class had come to expect and accept Rainbow’s bullying behaviour; too afraid to confront Rainbow directly, with each subsequent interruption they would simply roll their eyes and sigh. The upbeat atmosphere I looked to establish at the start of each Dance lesson was instantly undone.

The GCSE lessons were not fun; indeed, they had become somewhat of an ordeal for all involved. Many of the students in the class had younger siblings at the school, and I became acutely aware as the weeks passed by that my perceived inaction in the face of Rainbow’s disruptive behaviour would be denting my reputation as a teacher. How were they to know Rainbow had specific social-emotional needs that I had to take into account? That this was the reason I spent much of my time in class – to their frustration – either coaxing Rainbow or attempting to sanction her without criticising her.

*How can I be expected to persuade students to opt for GCSE Dance when this is the best that can be expected of me in the delivery of my subject, I thought?*

I used to pride myself on my ability to provide students such as Rainbow a place in school where they felt safe and welcome. In fact, when Rainbow was lower down the school, we'd got on well. She developed a begrudging respect for me, I think. That's not to say she didn't grumble about having to get on with the work, but after some gentle ribbing (she always responded well to humour), and allowing her perhaps to regale the class with her account of unfair treatment at the hands another teacher, she would eventually join in. Her characteristic scowl disappeared when she danced, and she would begin to interact more positively with her peers. I never drew her attention to this transformation for fear of breaking the spell. She'd even go as far as to scold the other students in the group she was working in if she perceived that they were not pulling their weight! I remember this level of engagement astonished a member of SLT conducting a lesson observation.

Whilst it's true to say that she was not the most elegant or precise dancer, Rainbow's creativity, verve and commitment more than made up for this. She had a love for street-dance choreography and therefore looked to include it whether or not this was strictly necessary for her to succeed in meeting the lesson's learning objectives. Reticent to disagree with Rainbow, it is perhaps no surprise that the students in her Year 9 class made above average progress in Dance that year.

When she asked me towards the end of Year 9: 'do you really think I'm good enough to take Dance at GCSE, Miss?'

'Absolutely,' I replied. 'You must.'

She struggled almost immediately. She found the theoretical aspects of the newly designed GCSE Dance course particularly challenging. Every time I introduced a new concept, a technical term, say, by which to describe a choreographer's work in the written examination, she would groan. It was as though the facts themselves rippled out,

across the cushioned lino - in waves of dust and toenail clippings - to batter Rainbow where she lay. And she lay further and further away. Meanwhile, weighing heavily on me was the wording of our Academy Trust's pay policy. Under the subtitle 'Questions to confirm your suitability for progression to UPS', it asked: '... have you got 2 years of data to show that your pupils are making at least expected progress?' I was due to move up to the higher pay scale, and a successful appraisal would bring a much-needed pay rise. Rainbow's underperformance in Dance could significantly dent my "value added" total for the small class.

#### *4.3.3 Looking the other way*

Rainbow's mother's reputation preceded her. Mrs. Randel had fought long and hard to win additional rights for Rainbow at school. Having paid considerable sums for healthcare professionals to diagnose her daughter's complex learning needs, Mrs. Randel's campaign to ensure the appropriate strategies were put in place in the classroom to meet those needs had become relentless: the school received weekly, daily, hourly phone calls and e-mails from her. She was also known to march into school unannounced.

There is much to admire about a mother who is invested in the education and wellbeing of her daughter to such a degree. The difficulty, however, for everybody involved, was the jarring mismatch between Mrs. Randel's apparent priorities and her daughter's. Rainbow simply did not care for school. Indeed, that's putting it lightly. Rainbow did not care for school, teachers, friends, family, or, I suspect, herself. Mrs. Randel regarded Rainbow's bad behaviour as a sign that the school was failing to meet her daughter's needs. A logic that had thwarted me on more than one occasion when I attempted to sanction Rainbow for bad behaviour in my lesson. For example, there was



the time Rainbow waved her purple 'Time Out' card in my face before I was able to reprimand her for heckling another student's solo choreography.

'It's not fair to distract a performer...' I began.

'You're making me angry,' interrupted Rainbow, 'I need to get away from your face.' And she stormed out.

I phoned Mrs. Randel to explain I would be issuing Rainbow with a detention, but before I could justify my reasoning, she interrupted me to say:

'Walking away from a situation that could have led to conflict is a real step forward for Rainbow, don't you think? It's evidence of a more mature attitude and she should be applauded not punished. I will write to the Head Teacher to explain my view.'

I recorded the detention on the system in the usual way, but as far as I know Rainbow was not required to attend it.

\*

I remember well the update on Rainbow's learning needs that took place two weeks before the incident where she barricaded me in the classroom. Rainbow's teachers were often required to gather in the conference room. A showcase facility, with state-of-the-art IT equipment, the conference room was for SLT and external lettings only. The Deputy Head Teacher - all beard and nervous energy - waited for everyone to arrive before turning down the Rolling Stones. With a matter-of-fact tone and limited gestures, his presentational style did little to hold an audience's attention. On this occasion he wasn't helped by positioning himself in front of a troubling painting depicting a distorted, naked figure on a skateboard (a Year 12 student's Giacometti inspired attempt to capture indie attitude according to the placard).

‘Private neuropsychological evaluations have identified that Rainbow struggles with auditory processing,’ he told us. ‘What you are witnessing in your lessons are the emotional and behavioural problems that accompany a specific learning disorder. Her intellectual ability is hampered...’

*Distorted naked skateboarder*, I thought.

‘Her mother has also discussed how she believes Rainbow is increasingly exhibiting ADHD symptoms,’ he continued. ‘Tests are ongoing, but if this diagnosis is confirmed I will let you know asap so that you can plan accordingly.’

The gathered teachers cast knowing glances. The Deputy Head Teacher began to wring his hands nervously.

‘The bottom line here,’ he continued after consulting his notes, ‘is that it is important to bear in mind that Rainbow’s oppositional behaviour is the result of her impaired executive functioning skills. She is unable to think ahead and assess the impact of her behaviour and therefore a certain amount of leeway is required with regards to her defiance’.

Sensing a growing restlessness in the room, he quickly added: ‘obviously if you sense a situation is going to escalate please call over to reception to send the “on-call” member of SLT to remove Rainbow from your classroom.’

I’d attempted to do this before. I telephoned over for SLT support when Rainbow refused to be parked outside the room for using the dance mirror to apply her makeup. A member of the administrative team informed me: ‘I think they’ve all left for the evening’.

‘Are there any questions?’ asked the Deputy Head Teacher.

I raised my hand. 'Whilst I agree we need to do everything we can to support Rainbow, I'm concerned about the other students in the class. They're anxious that they are not going to achieve their predicted grades...'

The Deputy Head Teacher met my question with one of his own:

'And you put that down to Rainbow's presence?' he asked.

Not wishing to appear unsympathetic or unable to meet Rainbow's needs, but also concerned not to raise doubts about the effectiveness of my teaching practice more generally: 'No. Yes. Well not entirely,' I said.

'I read an article in the TES recently,' the Deputy Head Teacher continued. 'it discussed how teacher anxiety might be contagious in the classroom...'

'He should try teaching her!' came a supportive whisper from behind me. The comment prompted stifled laughter and murmurs of agreement from amongst other teachers sat nearby.

The Deputy Head's nostrils flared.

'She is the child,' he declared, 'and you are the adults! You need to take charge of the learning situation. Those of you who I identified with stickers as you entered the room will you please stand up...'

Three teachers warily took to their feet. They each had a sticker cut into a diamond shape stuck to their sleeves. The Deputy Head nodded approvingly.

'Other than these three diamonds,' he explained, 'I do not believe the teachers in this room are planning properly differentiated lessons.'

Successfully subdued, we listened in silence then, as we were taken through a list of strategies we were expected to apply in order to engage Rainbow in her learning:

- 1) Rainbow is more likely to become confrontational if she becomes anxious that her Learning Needs will be exposed. Therefore, do not ask Rainbow questions in front of her peers. Talk to Rainbow privately to one side of the classroom to clarify her understanding of learning tasks or to discuss the appropriateness of her behaviour.
- 2) Rainbow struggles with auditory processing. Please provide Rainbow with straight forward written instructions of all learning tasks (following the guidelines set out in the SEN handbook: 'Tips for supporting students with dyslexia'). Also check her homework is recorded accurately and legibly in her planner.
- 3) Emphasise the relational nature of teaching and learning in your conversations with Rainbow.
- 4) Offer opportunities for Rainbow to access curriculum support in your subject area outside of her timetabled lessons.

The buzzer that marked the end of lunch sounded. Before we filed out, the Deputy Head Teacher made it clear to us that: 'unless Rainbow threatens you directly, you need to look to engage her with these strategies. Her outbursts are a symptom of the frustration she feels at not being able to access the curriculum as easily as her classmates. We need evidence of the application of these strategies to support you in supporting Rainbow further; whether that be here, or, if necessary, in securing a more appropriate place for her elsewhere.'

\*

Having had the sanction ladder taken out from underneath me, I felt compelled to apply more creative strategies to manage the situation in my GCSE Dance lessons. If I noticed

Rainbow swallowing a mouthful of sweets, I would purposefully step in front of her reflection in the dance studio mirror and shout an instruction to the class in time to drown out whatever disparaging comment she might make. I'm not proud of myself for doing this. But it worked. At least to begin with. The other students began to enjoy themselves again and would leave the class talking enthusiastically about what they had learnt.

*Even if Rainbow's poor grades skew my examination results, and SLT use it as an opportunity not to award me my pay increase, I will have at least improved my reputation - and the reputation of GCSE Dance - amongst the student body, I reasoned. If I secure student numbers, I secure my position at the school in the long term.*

#### *4.3.4 Killing with kindness*

To return to where I began: Rainbow had positioned herself between the class and the classroom door. Unbeknownst to me, she had become increasingly aggrieved at being ignored during the lesson. I was just about to tell the class to go and get changed when I felt her hand clasp my shoulder.

'I know what you're doing,' she hissed.

'Please don't touch me, Reyna,' I said, via the dance mirror, 'I think perhaps you need to leave the classroom.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' she declared.

In a moment of perverse comedy, we both charged towards the classroom door. She made it first. Victorious, she leant against it, arms folded, eyebrows raised in expectation.

Dread began to take hold of me. I struggled for breath. The eyes of the other students in the class bore into me.

That is until an awful thought crosses my mind, and I feel fine in an instant: *I can work this situation to my advantage.*

I step a little closer to Rainbow than perhaps I should, smiling from ear to ear.

‘What’s so funny?’ she demands. ‘You look weird.’

I passively accept the insult.

She knocks the differentiated learning resources I’d prepared for her off the table next to the door. ‘You think you’re all that...’ she shouts.

I remain composed. Smiling and nodding. Smiling and nodding.

‘Stop smiling at me! You’re ugly when you smile!’

*Finally! There it is. Progress.*

‘I’m sorry you feel that way, *Rainbow*,’ I say, slowly and deliberately, ‘let’s talk about this to one side of the dance studio shall we? No? Okay. Let’s talk here then shall we.’

*I’m talking, I think, but it doesn’t sound me.*

*...talk to Rainbow privately to one side of the classroom to discuss the appropriateness of her behaviour...*

‘I can see that your Dance education means an awful lot to you by the strength of feeling that you are demonstrating in this moment,’ I continue.

*Who knew I could be so patronising?*

I catch sight of myself in the mirror: washed out, resigned. Not myself at all.

‘If you need some time out, I am more than happy for you to take it,’ I suggest.

‘Would you like to use your “Time-out” card, *Rainbow*?’

Rainbow huffs and puffs but says nothing.

‘Are you listening to me?’ I ask, sensing victory within my grasp. ‘I hope you’re listening to me because I made sure to listen to everything you had to say...’

No response.

‘*Rainbow?*’

‘Stop calling me that! I’m warning you...’

‘There’s no need to issue threats; we need to work together you and I...’

*... Emphasise the relational nature of teaching and learning in your conversations with Rainbow...*

I explain: ‘I’m more than happy to work with you one lunchtime if you feel you are falling behind. Or what about we arrange for you to come to school one Saturday? I’ll call your mother to arrange it shall I?’

*...Offer opportunities for Rainbow to access curriculum support in your subject area outside of her timetabled lessons...*

‘I think we arranged to meet to go through your choreography once before, didn’t we? Maybe you were ill? Or perhaps you forgot? Never mind. What’s important, *Rainbow*, is that you understand that you are the one in charge of your learning. Now tell me, what can I do to help you succeed?’

‘You... You... fucking bitch!’ she shouts.

An audible intake of breath from the other students in class.

And it’s over.

I wait for *Rainbow* to process the potential consequences of what she has said, before asking her: ‘are you going to let us through the door now?’

Her eyes drop to the floor and she steps to one side.

‘Thank you for that, Reyna,’ I say. I mean it, too.

Having seen the rest of the students safely leave the changing rooms to catch the late bus home, I return to the dance studio to switch off the lights before I leave. I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel a degree of sympathy towards Rainbow in that moment, stood, as she was, in an empty classroom, with no one left to curse other than herself.

#### *4.3.5 Amongst the wreckage*

The following day the Deputy Head Teacher asked to meet me. He’d written in his e-mail: ‘I’m on duty on the field, but we can walk and talk.’

I should have felt better about things. After all, the likelihood was that - after such unprovoked and outrageous behaviour - Rainbow wouldn’t return to my class. Strange then that the relief I’d initially felt had mutated overnight into what I can only describe as a form of disgust. Largely aimed at myself.

*You’ve done nothing wrong*, I reminded myself as I made my way down to the playing fields. But I’m not sure I really believed it.

The sickly-sweet smell of fresh grass cuttings rotting in the sun greeted me. I weaved my way through the various groups of students, ducking every now and again to avoid rogue footballs.

I eventually found the Deputy Head Teacher crouched next to a hollowed-out hedgerow analysing cigarette butts. He greeted me with an aphorism: ‘prevention is the best cure.’

‘I see,’ I said and asked him what it was he wanted to discuss with me. He explained that he wanted to tell me in person that he was personally following up the incident with Rainbow.

‘She will not be continuing with Dance,’ he said.



*Thank goodness, I thought.*

‘Indeed, in light of her behaviour, there are likely to be wider consequences...’  
he said.

My stomach lurched.

‘Of course, her mother will suggest you provoked Rainbow’s outburst,’ he continued. ‘She’ll appeal whatever decision the school makes and look to prove that you didn’t follow the strategies recommended on Rainbow’s Individual Education Plan.’

*Tread carefully, I thought.*

‘My careful management of the situation was witnessed by the entire class,’ I said.

‘Yes, I’ve read the witness statements.’

We stood for a moment in silence watching a group of Year 7 girls giggling at one another’s unsuccessful attempts to cartwheel.

‘I hope you feel reassured that the appropriate action has been taken,’ the Deputy Head Teacher said, stroking his beard.

‘Yes. Thank you.’

I decided to take the opportunity to ask him what the curriculum arrangements for Dance would be for the following academic year; with less than two weeks to go until the end of the summer term I still hadn’t been issued with a timetable. Some of my current Year 9 students appeared to have a better idea than I did, having approached me earlier in the day to ask why GCSE Dance would not be running as an afterschool option for them.

‘Health and safety concerns have been raised about continuing to run Dance GCSE afterschool,’ the Deputy Head Teacher explained. ‘I will be “on-call” for your

current cohort, who will be in Year 11 next year, however the curriculum committee has decided Year 10 Dance will not run.'

'So... Dance will no longer be in the curriculum?'

'That's not quite what I said. We do value the Performing Arts here. That's why we supported your suggestion that Dance should run as an optional afterschool GCSE in the first place. Certainly, if you can recruit higher student numbers next academic year, Dance will be reintroduced into the school day the year after. Surely you're happy about that?'

'But the options process is organised in such a way that...'

My words ran dry, lost somewhere beneath the growing belief that this situation was of my own making.

'It's important that students are given every opportunity to succeed according to the DfE performance measures of Progress 8 and the EBacc,' the Deputy Head Teacher said. 'There's a bigger picture that perhaps you are not aware of...'

The thought of the chasm between the success he referred to and my experience of Rainbow made me laugh despite myself.

'Something funny?' he demanded.

'Not at all. What will I teach if I am not teaching Dance?'

'Well as you know, the Head Teacher has made the commitment to avoid making redundancies, at least in the short term. Business Studies has proven to be a popular GCSE option this year; I understand you took Business Studies at A-level?'

'Yes. But that was eighteen years ago...'

'Well then - let's just wait and see shall we.'

With the choppy waters of job uncertainty on the horizon, I became acutely aware all-of-a-sudden for the need to construct a more positive impression of myself in the Deputy Head Teacher's eyes. Reluctantly, I attempted small talk:

'I don't know if I told you I'm going to a local music festival at the start of the summer holiday,' I garbled, 'there's a Rolling Stones tribute act playing-'

'Remove that boy from the dustbin immediately!' barked the Deputy Head.

'I'm sorry?'

He strode down the playing field in the direction of the binning of Charlie Castle (who, despite being covered in satsuma peel, yoghurt and half a dozen other half-finished pack lunch items, continued to grin inanely). 'Apology accepted,' he called back to me over his shoulder, shortly followed by, 'and I'll see you on results day!'

*Does he mean that as a parting shot, I wondered? Or does his indifference towards me extend that far?*

Either way the comment cut me to the quick. I felt my stomach lurch again.

*Bullies are not easily forgiven, I thought.*

## **5 Findings Part 2: Critical interpretation of the storied data towards identifying the techniques and effects of power in teacher-subject formation**

### ***5.1 Introduction***

The two stories illustrate how gossip, as a speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986), functions for teachers as a discursive tool to critically interrogate ‘those boundaries and dividing lines that make the normative prevailing discourses legitimate’ (Leach, 2000: 231). They seek to grasp the conditions that make teacher gossip possible within the institutional rules that define the limits of what is and what is not “sayable” (Foucault, 1991: 59). In this commentary I look to return to the social and, in conversation with the wider critical literature I reviewed in Chapter 2, develop a more detailed understanding of the discursive positioning of the teacher-participants in the stories by identifying and analysing how specific techniques and effects of power work through them as subjects to secure compliance.

I hope that a transferable understanding with regards to some of these techniques and effects of power might emerge. As previously discussed, my aim is to contribute to a counterproject of destabilisation that reveals the neoliberal project in education to be socially unjust, and in doing so support local resistance - evident in the gossip narratives from the field that I have recorded and (re)presented - from across the network of hierarchical models that represent state secondary schooling in England (Hudson, 2007; Jessop, 2011).

As I made clear in my Methodology chapter, this critical commentary is perspectival; in other words, I am analysing the (re)presented gossip narrative/s from within my prejudices (Schwandt, 2000). As Sikes (2005: 90) points out, ‘stories tell us as much about their authors as they do about their subjects’. By storying the data I sought to make it clear to the research-audience that I have written about the “truths” of

the teacher-participants *as I see them* (or rather, *as I saw them* at the time of writing); likewise, in the following interpretation of the storied accounts, it is my intention to create further dialectical opportunities with my research-audience rather than close off interpretive alternatives. To this end, I endeavour to express my identification and interpretation of themes with caution in order to invite a productive scepticism.

I have organised this chapter around three specific interrelated operations of power I recognise the neoliberal project in education employs to incentivise teachers to act as its agents despite their resistance: firstly, in response to extraordinary pressure from accountability policies (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2009; Hall & McGinity, 2015; Hall & Gunter, 2016), I discuss how the teacher-participants appear to contribute to an individualist culture in the schools through desperate “out of character” acts of self-preservation; secondly, I go on to explore how the neoliberal project in education relies on this individualist culture to deflect blame for its democratic failings onto individual actors (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Harvey, 2007b); and finally, I consider how, by protecting their privilege and contributing to social injustice, the teacher-participants experience a subsequent sense of shame that is mobilised against them (MacLure, 2011) to undermine their confidence in their critical reflexive capacities.

I consider the further implications of my findings in the concluding chapter.

## ***5.2 Inscription through self-preservation***

First, the storied data suggests that the teachers in the study who are resistant to the neoliberal project in education become its agents by responding to aggressive neoliberal performances enacted by others in kind. By prioritising their responsibility-to-self teachers become caught up in what might be best described as ‘self-preservation’ behaviours. This extends an earlier point of Connell’s (2013: 106), that activity within

educational contexts under neoliberal governance is guided by how best to extract advantage from others, for example through emphasis on terminal examinations where achievement is measured in relation to the underachievement of others.

### *5.2.1 Ruthless individualism*

Whilst the teacher-participants in the study may not be looking to ‘extract private advantage’ (Connell, 2013: 106) from their colleagues they do concede to a ruthless individualism in response to feeling threatened by others who do. They see no other way to protect their own institutional “capital” in relation - and at a potential cost - to their colleagues and (some) students.

For example, as the first story unfolds, the protagonist infers in moments of self-deprecating despair that he is beginning to question his ethical self-constitution. Despite his genuine intentions he becomes implicated in modes of practice and behaviour that leave him somewhat riven. Paradoxically, he accuses NQT of cheating despite this being the sort of competitive tactic that has led him to condemn NQT in the first place. The story can therefore be recognised as an example of how:

[r]espect and trust are undermined by the jockeying for position in competitive markets. Educational institutions ... become purveyors of spin, image-making, manipulative marketing, organized boasting and sometimes more toxic forms of deceit (Connell, 2013: 106).

Social Relations have been circumscribed by the neoliberal in the school where the teacher in the second story works to the extent that, against her better judgement, she not only concedes to the individualist logic of the neoliberal project in education in

an attempt to protect her job, but utilises it in what is tantamount to an act of ethical violence against a student. She coaxes an underperforming student to misbehave in order to have her removed from the class so as not to skew her performance data. Whilst it is difficult to justify the teacher's actions it is important to note that she is driven by desperation. She worries that she will lose her job if she does not meet performance targets that compare favourably in comparison with her colleagues'. Further to this, she suspects her management will discontinue the already marginalised subject she teaches (the marginalisation of the arts in the neoliberal school is an issue I return to in more depth presently).

### *5.2.2 Institutional loyalty*

In both stories, the response from management towards a critical teacher-voice that questions the way a school is run is dismissive. In the first story, in response to the protagonist's incredulity that NQT has been asked to lead staff training despite his superficial "teach-to-test" pedagogy and his rudeness to colleagues, SLT undermines the validity of his concerns by suggesting any criticism is born of jealousy. In the second story, the Deputy Head Teacher accuses the protagonist of being ungrateful for the support she has already received when she asks for more.

This is a local realisation - on the level of the teacher-subject - of a key theme in the literature. This silencing of critical teacher-voice is facilitated by the self-regulation afforded to comprehensive schools since the academy programme (Robertson & Lauder, 2001). As I discussed in depth in my Literature Review, successive governments, looking to improve education according to neoliberal codes of thinking, encouraged schools - with financial incentives (Davies and Bansel 2007: 249) - to break away from their local education authorities and go it alone, positing schools against one

another in a market model (Ball, 2011; Broadfoot, 2001). From a manager's perspective, therefore, the role of the employee-teacher is to contribute to the "selling" of the school to prospective customer-parents by enabling students to achieve nationally competitive test results (Adaman & Mantra, 2013; Ball, 2003). A 'de-professionalization of teachers' (Connell, 2013: 108) has therefore occurred, and any critical opinions teachers have with regards to the nature and quality of education they provide beyond the narrow, instrumental conception of knowledge that the neoliberal project permits to this end are rendered irrelevant and a hindrance (McGregor, 2009).

Both protagonists are wrongfooted by the short-sightedness of the executive approach their respective managers appear to adopt: rather than having their contribution to the school over time recognised and acknowledged, what appears to matter is how to secure a set of good examination results in the current academic within financial constraints. This is perhaps why the protagonist in the first story finds NQT's rapid ascent particularly abhorrent; it confirms for him that he has been labouring under the misapprehension that a professional reputation is earned and not won. The teacher-participants in the stories are regarded by management as functional in the service of the market agenda of their school, and by this measure NQT's superficial but effective charms and pedagogy are recognised as valuable by management and are therefore coveted. The irony for the disillusioned protagonist is that there *is* a collective sense of responsibility amongst the staff in the school where he works, however rather than it being directed towards care of one another and providing an equitable curriculum for students as he assumed, it is directed towards care of self through maintaining the reputation of the school. Afterall, an oversubscribed school makes for a more comfortable working environment as the staff are not working under the threat of redundancy due the financial repercussions of a falling roll (Hursh, 2005; Robertson &



Lauder, 2001). Both protagonists are therefore asked to “buy in” to the common-sense argument that protecting their respective institution’s reputation should be their priority. Airing misgivings about the school’s educational efficacy are seen, from this perspective, to undermine the good work of others by potentially inviting an increase in external scrutiny and regulation (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2009: 18). Why would you voluntarily invite more “heat”?

The protagonist in the second story realises that, through her persistent resistance to the curriculum model, specifically the structure of the Year 9 options process, that she has positioned herself as an irritant, in so far as the continuation of her subject represents an obstacle to the aim of achieving unfettered market dominance by meeting the DfE criteria for success; it will make the school where she works less attractive to parent-consumers by negatively impacting the headline results, which in turn makes the school less attractive on the “open” education market. Concerned, in the end, that she may have jeopardised her employment at the school altogether, her last-minute attempts to ingratiate herself with the Deputy Head Teacher do little more than further dent her sense of self-worth. Likewise, from the unfriendly reactions of colleagues after his meeting with SLT, the protagonist in the first story quickly grasps that his actions have damaged his social standing: the potential ramifications for the school of his decision to whistle blow has led to him being branded as a traitor and he is ostracised as a result.

Unable to raise critical concerns with or around their employers for the reasons I have discussed, the teachers in this study turned to gossip: a safe “not-to-be-taken-seriously” ‘speech genre’ (Bakhtin, 1986) where they could air concerns with regards to their positioning as neoliberal teacher-subjects without being accused of being

disloyal<sup>28</sup>. This returns us to de Souza's (1994) argument that, positioned as it is on the margins of official discourse (Foucault, 1980b: 82) gossip is as an inherently democratic process.

### *5.2.3 Learnt helplessness cast as entrepreneurialism*

It could be argued, that NQT in the first story, new to the teaching, knows no different, and is simply doing his best to operate under the crippling pressure of accountability (Stern, 2012; Wrigley et al, 2012). This is not to say that he has made a sound or moral judgement by providing too much guidance to his students in the completion of their coursework. However, it raises the question: is NQT's "cheating" the result of a character flaw, or rather is it due to the lack of support and guidance he has received in a competitive environment that places emphasis on individual achievement? It is easier and more comfortable to believe it is the former, but it does not necessarily make it "true".

NQT might recognise modelling how to write the coursework content as a logical extension of the positivist "one best way" (Burnard & White, 2008: 669) training he has received. This is not as perverse as it might initially sound: if there is a tightly defined assessment criteria, and the inclusion of a specific paragraphing structure will mean students are able to access top band marks, it is surely acceptable to point this

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<sup>28</sup> The role of the teaching unions to provide support for teachers to respond critically to NPM has been significantly reduced as the result of decentralisation policies. Not least because the (quasi) self-regulation of schools (Peters, 2012) has led to confusion with regards to the new expectations and demands placed on teachers and employment law, particularly over contractual obligations related to teacher-pay and working-conditions (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

out to them? Or how about if the exclusion of a particular sort of language is preventing a student from accessing top band marks in an otherwise outstanding piece of work (perhaps the student hasn't included enough evaluative language, for example), would it be acceptable for NQT to highlight this? If the work is well written otherwise, NQT might regard the student's omission as his own fault, perhaps he has not made the criteria explicit enough? He might reason that providing detailed corrections is not so different to the common practice of drilling students in examination technique to the point where they are memorising paragraphs from practice essays that have been 'corrected' by the teacher (to be "copied and pasted" in such a way so as to give the impression that it is their application of knowledge in response to the demands of an exam question).

But the problem is even more complex than this, is it not? If NQT had given his student an example of how a sentence in the coursework could be restructured to achieve higher marks verbally, as opposed to writing it down, would this still have been perceived as cheating? I am aware I am stretching the point here, but what is clear to me from the narratives I have (re)presented in this study is that teachers are increasingly caught-up in such ethical quandaries, looking to support their students claim advantage in a broken system where comparability makes a mockery of scholarship (Ball, 2003). Supporting students in the neoliberal school requires the technicisation of knowledge and skills for the purposes of measurement, and, arguably, NQT has taken this to its logical conclusion.

The comments made by a student to the protagonist in the first story are telling: 'why can't you just tell us what to write ... don't you care what marks we get?' Positioned as clients, the students consider any collaborative 'knowledge building' (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1999) activities as an unnecessary distraction and time-

wasting exercise. This returns us to the Grant's (2007: viii) view, that an emphasis on the importance of comparability through competition has rendered the learning process passive through the intimidation of speculation and discovery. The students recognise that, to succeed according to the dominant neoliberal principles that structure their lives, they need only acquire a superficial grasp of the facts in order to 'extract private advantage' (Connell, 2013: 106) from their peers by achieving better examination results.

However, NQT appears to not only accept but embrace the values of the neoliberal project in education. Under neoliberalism citizens are redefined as 'entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life' (Brown, 2003: 15). They are recognised – and recognise themselves – 'as rational subjects whose goal in life is to be self-sufficient' (ibid). It is recognised that the state has withdrawn from direct control of the education sector (albeit managing from afar by holding schools to account through a raft of centralised policy decisions in a quasi-market model (Gordon & Whitty, 1997: 455)), and therefore the successful individual involved in education is conceived of as entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurial individuals, according to neoliberal logic, are "empowered" to take responsibility for attaining power within the structures available to them (Harvey, 2007a: 76). Arguably, this is what NQT does: he accepts his role as 'executive technician' (Winch, 2014) in the classroom and seeks to excel at it.

It could be we are seeing the first generation who accept neoliberal modes of governance in education uncritically because it is all they have ever known<sup>29</sup>. From the late 1980s onwards, the impact of the neoliberal project in education has accelerated as a result of standardisation. This means any teacher currently thirty-five years old or

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<sup>29</sup> Archer, (2008) makes a similar point with reference to early career academics in the UK context.

younger (so called “Thatcher’s Children” onwards) are the first generation of students appropriated by the neoliberal education economy. Arguably, therefore, they face a far greater challenge to imagine beyond the relentless march of the markets. Not least because the marketised education system has led to achieving their successful employment as a teacher.

Further to this, the increase in school-based routes into teaching can entrench a helplessness that is then learnt by colleagues new to the profession. The government stated aim at the creation of a national network of teaching schools is that teaching is ‘best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman’ (Gove, 2010). However, what is negated by this redefinition of teacher learning as teacher training is the development of a critical appreciation of the historicity of the current sociopolitical educational landscape (Giroux, 2014: 87). Without such ‘recourse to a wider spectrum of academic and professional knowledge to guide one’s professional values and action’ (Whitehead, 2011: 30), new teachers are likely to enter the profession accepting the “effective” teaching methods proposed and upon which they are judged.

### ***5.3 Prioritising individual investments in order to deflect blame for a growing democratic deficit***

With a focus on individual “investments” throughout, systemic failures in the two schools in the stories are left unaddressed. A recurrent theme in the literature is how democratic failings in secondary education are blamed on individuals rather than on the neoliberal project in education itself, which continues to place economic incentives above equity, inclusion and professionalism (Greany and Higham 2018: 18; Tomlinson, 2001: 73). I now turn my attention to analysing the two storied accounts to understand how this is achieved through the production of the teacher-subject.

### *5.3.1 The privatization of rights*

The illusion that the marketplace is fundamentally democratic is sustained by the neoliberal claim that it provides children equal access to opportunity. This is not, as Hursh (2005: 12) points out, the same as equality. In the second story, Rainbow's mother struggles to understand how her daughter could be failing when she invests considerable time and effort in securing her a place at an 'outstanding' school and regularly directing teaching staff to her needs<sup>30</sup>.

However, the mother's individualist stance, fighting for her daughter's rights in this way, is actually - in an example of neoliberal double-think - evidence of her docility as an individual in the face of a system promoted by and driven by those who would benefit from and therefore seek to perpetuate social injustice (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Harvey, 2007b). Her daughter will remain unable to access the curriculum despite her mother's ongoing campaign to secure the right for her to attend the school. Gillborn and Youdell (2000), who argue that neoliberal educational reforms have resulted in growing inequalities based on social class, suggest that students who are socially disadvantaged are likely to receive less attention. This, they explain, is due to how such students struggle to access the curriculum as a result of the differences between their home culture and school culture, for example the language used (Hollins, 2015). The extra support they require would divert an unproportionate amount of teachers' resources away from students who could progress more easily and quickly, towards success according to the external attainment measures by which the school will be judged. The

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<sup>30</sup> The protagonist is required to accept Rainbow's poor behaviour in her classroom due to the litany of psychological diagnoses her mother has secured for her. This can be seen as an example of how the corporate values championed by neoliberalism have led to what Giroux (2014) refers to as 'the privatization of rights discourse' (117).

potential for success in the secondary education marketplace is therefore skewed towards students from a particular social background (Giroux, 1988; Levitas, 2005).

### *5.3.2 The reduction of arts provision*

Symptomatic of the technicization of knowledge and skills for the purposes of measurement in the neoliberal school is the decline of arts subjects. The subjective and collaborative nature of the arts makes student attainment difficult to measure. Put simply, the arts represent a challenge to the neoliberal project because they are difficult to commodify. To extend this argument further, the personal reflection and deep thinking involved in engaging with the arts<sup>31</sup> can be recognised as a possible affront - or threat even - to neoliberal logic because it encourages expressive thought (and feeling) about and beyond the norm. Through the marginalisation of the arts the neoliberal project in education therefore looks to evade criticism (Connell, 2013) because, as Baltodano (2012) argues, a relentless focus on measurable skills and knowledge that contribute to the neoliberal economy will ultimately lead to 'the lack of an articulate public' (489) to challenge it.

The situation that the Dance teacher in the second story finds herself in, scrabbling around for students to opt for the Dance GCSE course, is reflective of a wider trend. Entries to arts qualifications are the lowest they have been in over a decade (Johnes, 2017)<sup>32</sup>. This situation has come about because the government has encouraged

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<sup>31</sup> The links between the arts and higher order thinking is well documented. In the instance of Dance, which the data directly refers to, please see for example: Root-Bernstein (2003); Snowber, (2012); Stevens & McKechnie (2005).

<sup>32</sup> Following Easton and Neelands (2015), by 'arts qualifications' I refer to subject areas related to: Drama; Dance; Music; and Art and Design.

the take-up of specific “traditional” academic subjects at GCSE through incentives in the school accountability system. For example, The English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which the Deputy Head Teacher references in the story in his conversation with the Dance teacher, is a school performance measure introduced in 2010. Theresa May’s Conservative Government has further prioritised this measure, stating that it has aspirations for 90% of students in state secondary schools to be entered (DfE, 2015). To achieve the EBacc, a student must succeed in achieving a GCSE at what is considered a pass level in its five components: Maths, English, the sciences, History or Geography, and a language (DfE, 2016c).

There is also pressure for students who are interested in studying towards a Science, Technology, Engineering and/or Mathematics degree (STEM) at a top tier university in the UK to avoid creative subjects at A-level. Easton and Neelands (2015) are concerned that this will lead to a deficit in creative thinking in the UK and call on Russell Group Universities to recognise the benefits to STEM fields of knowledge and industries of students developing their creative and critical thinking ability by studying an arts subject. Highlighting how crucial creativity is to innovation, they advocate a move away from STEM towards a recognition of the need for knowledge and skills from a combination of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics (STEAM) across the education sector.

### *5.3.3 Extracurricular access denied*

Within a marketised education system that promotes individual competition, extracurricular offers become hugely important. Perhaps even life changing. They can work as a social interstice: offering students a space to work together creatively without being expected to ‘extract private advantage’ (Connell, 2013: 106) from one another. It



is perhaps no coincidence that research suggests a positive correlation between schools' extracurricular offer and students' academic achievement (see for example: Mahoney, et al 2003; Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2012). Extracurricular programmes can perhaps go some way to healing the wounds inflicted on students by the individualist stance the neoliberal project requires they take. To return to the second story for a moment, perhaps this is what Rainbow hoped for and needed from the afterschool Dance lessons she attended; a Dance club where she could express herself without fear of failure. Unfortunately, as a result of the financial concerns that can shape an academy's curriculum offer, she found herself in a highly structured, instructional Dance lesson with peers desperate to do better than her. Rainbow's delight in learning dance for its own sake has been taken from her (Grant, 2009: viii) and the focus placed on accruing "capital" through examination success.

As I discussed in my Literature Review, successful state schools within the current neoliberal paradigm are those that replicate a private school curriculum (Gordon & Whitty, 1997). And yet, in contrast to the struggle the Dance teacher in the second story faces, the arts appear to be thriving in the private sector. Indeed, many of our leading dancers and actors have been privately schooled, a concern that has recently risen to the fore in public consciousness as the result of a widely publicised report (Sutton Trust, 2016)<sup>33</sup>.

There are two likely reasons for this: firstly, as private funding alleviates the financial constraints that exist in the state sector with regards to staff-to-student ratios,

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<sup>33</sup> The Sutton Trust (2016) reports that 42% of Bafta winners were educated independently, despite figures suggesting that only 7% of students in the UK attend fee-paying schools. For examples of how the media reported on this in relation to specific awards ceremonies see Gurney-Reed (2016) and Ryan (2016).

arts teachers in the private sector are not required to compete for students in order to secure their place in the curriculum<sup>34</sup>; secondly, curriculum time is given over to arts activities in the private sector that are not formally part of their curriculum offer.

The “extracurricular” arts activity in the state secondary school is conceived of as “co-curricular” in the private school, a telling use of language that highlights how the development of skills and attitudes associated with arts participation is recognised to impact positively on students’ studies and wellbeing more generally despite not fulfilling the criteria to contribute to external measurements of the school’s success. In contrast to this, and what these findings suggest, is that extracurricular arts provision in state schools is undervalued and under threat by neoliberalising (Canaan, 2013) forces in state education.

For example, in the second story, the Dance teacher is required to teach her subject afterschool in a reduced amount of time (as a “fast-track” course) which leaves her little time to run a non-examined Dance club. The pressure to produce results has also led her to prioritise the assessment of draft written work and revision sessions (to drill students in preparation for terminal examinations) during her remaining lunchtimes and afterschool hours. The teacher engages with this narrow perspective of pedagogy despite recognising that she is not being the teacher that all the children in her class need her to be. These local findings accord with national research: due to limited resources in the state secondary school, extracurricular arts opportunities are accessed

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<sup>34</sup> British International fee-paying schools recognise the importance of STEAM through the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum programme they offer. The IB diploma, for example, requires all students to study an arts subject as one of six core subject groups (IB, 2019).

by those school students whose caregivers can afford to send them to private arts clubs (Sutton Trust, 2014: 25).

The neoliberal project in education acknowledges that certain knowledge holds social/cultural power on the one hand, positioning itself as saviour - yet again - in relation to its own failings by requiring state schools to ensure their curriculum is 'knowledge rich' (Gibb, 2017); however it continues to insidiously perpetuate the social inequality upon which it relies by incentivising state schools to reduce their arts provision and deny students of a lower social groups the tools to access what consequently becomes a 'culture of power' (Delpit 2006: 24). Increasingly, the arts are perceived as a leisure activity for those from a higher social class, an elitist pastime that provides a language for the elite to determine who are members of their social group to the exclusion of others.

#### *5.3.4 Abdication of responsibility*

With individuals cast as entrepreneurs, the neoliberal project in education is able to explain away its democratic failures (Apple, 2005) as the consequence of the mismanaged lives of individuals (Abelmann et al., 2009).

The second story demonstrates how the "blame" for perpetuating social inequality in a school is passed from one individual to the next as a consequence of the ruthless individualism described previously. The teacher and SLT in the second story both perform self-preservation manoeuvres to ensure they are not "scapegoated" by the neoliberal project in education for its democratic failings.

Although the curriculum arrangements that place the Dance teacher's subject in jeopardy have been brought about by the impact of economic constraints on the one hand and external attainment measures upon which the school will be judged on the

other, SLT implies the situation is of her own making. He infers that she has not inspired enough students to want to opt to study her subject at GCSE level. SLT is purposefully positioning the teacher as a failure in order to justify a policy that might otherwise be questioned on the grounds of fairness. Exactly why he does this is open to interpretation: it is possible he recognises the injustice in it and values her subject (despite his apparent standoffishness) but does not wish to admit his involvement in its demise. Alternatively, is his aim is to halt Dance provision altogether and, in order not to have to pay redundancy money, the Dance teacher is being led to believe her ability is in question and that it would be best for her were she to leave “voluntarily” before her reputation is tarnished? Putting an arbitrary number on what is regarded as successful recruitment to a GCSE course in this way - and applying this to all subject areas without reviewing the structural arrangements that disproportionately provide access to some subjects over others - might suggest the latter is more likely.

The teacher is clearly at a disadvantage in the “blame-game” that ensues because she is - understandably - reticent to accuse her employer of wrongdoing. With no option open to her other than to pass the blame downwards to those with less power than herself, she eliminates the perceived threat that her disenfranchised student poses to her reputation by manufacturing a situation of conflict that will lead to the student’s exclusion from the class. She cannot, in the end, see any other way by which to secure her job.

This is a localised example of how, through the establishment of an individualised culture in schools, the blame for the neoliberal project in education’s democratic failings cascades down, through school leaders’ responses to policy, and teachers’ decisions with regards to pedagogy and classroom management, until it eventually reaches those stakeholders in education with the least power: disenfranchised

students like Rainbow. If socially disadvantaged students fail to succeed, rather than being recognised as a systemic concern, it is explained away as a consequence of their inability to manage their conduct in such a way so as to ‘extract private advantage’ (Connell, 2013: 106).

#### ***5.4 Emotion recognised as a character flaw***

I now go on to explore how the neoliberal project in education, despite its claim that unquantifiable human processes are a hurdle to democratic relations, relies on provoking negative personal feelings to regulate teacher practice and behaviour.

According to the neoliberal project in education emotion is recognised as a hinderance to the rational business of teaching and learning. As discussed in depth in my Literature Review, education has inherited a ‘largely positivist ethos’ (Peters and Burbules, 2004: 4) that the neoliberal project has been able to couple itself to in order to become the common-sense organising force in education. This is because the neoliberal project in education lends itself to quantification through the relentless monitoring of performance for the purposes of comparison in the education market (McGregor, 2009). Such comparison requires objective, standardised data in the form of homogeneous teacher practice (Burnard & White, 2008). Individual teachers’ creative intelligence has therefore been removed from the pedagogical process (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2009: 175) towards the establishment of an objective “one best way”. Value judgements and the feelings associated with them are dismissed as unnecessary to the instrumental, technocratic business of teaching and learning.

In the second story the protagonist’s anxiety is regarded by the Deputy Head Teacher as a sign that she is failing to deliver in the classroom. The teacher is experiencing anxiety because she cannot simultaneously meet the complex behavioural

needs of a student and teach the rest of her class (at least not with the resources made available to her). Her decision to orientate her pedagogy away from the single, disruptive student comes to define them both in terms that suit the neoliberal project in education. Initially the teacher is positioned to accept responsibility for the systemic failings of which she herself is also a victim, she is recognised as a “struggling teacher”. However, upon realising she is being held accountable - and against her better judgement - the teacher falls back on the structures available to her to neutralise the threat. As previously discussed, it is the stakeholder with the least power who ends up taking the blame for the failings of the neoliberal project, the student becomes recognised as an “unteachable child”.

Whilst the abdication of social responsibility can be seen to be driven by fear and anxiety, the ability of the teachers in this study to critically reflect on their positionality appears to be interrupted by the subsequent sense of shame they experience at catching sight of themselves caught up in the logic of competition.

Teachers who are unable to arrive at a justification for decisions they have made with regards to their conduct that contribute to the social injustice of the neoliberal project in education - and therefore remain shameful as a consequence - risk becoming ill. Both protagonists infer that their mental health is beginning to suffer under the strain. Mental health issues currently plague the teaching profession (Asthana & Boycott-Owen, 2018; Leeds Beckett University, 2018), and whilst further research needs to be done in this area, it is likely that a reduction in agency in relation to professional constitution plays no small part.

The storied data suggests that the instrumental neoliberal project in education has emotional provocation in its arsenal. Whilst it dismisses teacher value judgements and the associated feelings as irrelevant to its prescriptive model of teacher

professionalism, it appears to simultaneously rely on emotional provocation to secure compliance. Beyond the feelings of fear that Ball (2003) and Stevenson and Wood (2013) discuss, the data suggests that some teachers experience feelings of shame in response to their implication in individualist and competitive behaviours. As a consequence of knowingly contributing to the maintenance of the neoliberal project in education, the teachers in this study feel unable to subsequently criticise it and their resistance is muted. In both instances, affect can be understood to have been ‘mobilized’ (MacLure, 2011: 1002) towards oppression by the neoliberal project in education.

### ***5.5 Summary of findings***

To return to my research question: how does the dominant neoliberal discourse work to secure the compliance of teachers as social actors, particularly those who are resistant to the neoliberal model of teacher identity they are expected to perform? One of the key themes to emerge in the writing of the storied (re)presentations of the gossip-data is how neoliberal governance works *through* teachers in particularly insidious ways, restricting the efficacy of the individual teacher’s reflexive process and impose a pattern of concerns. The teachers-participants in this study are incentivised to act as agents of a system they simultaneously resist.

Caught up in the logic of competition, the teacher-participants in this study can be recognised to have their energies directed towards defending their capital, as a result of others looking to secure power - and command privilege - at their expense. This manifests as “out-of-character” individualist behaviour.

Further to this, the findings suggest that the neoliberal project in education maintains dominance by working through teacher-subjects to “sacrifice” colleagues (directly, through disciplinary apparatus, or indirectly, through voluntary redundancy or

illness) in order to deflect criticism away from itself. Teachers are incentivised by fear to lay the blame for the project's failings at the feet of others. Not only does this mean that, on the face of it, the project's professed egalitarian aims (Hursh, 2005; Kumar & Hill, 2012; Peters 2012) remain untarnished and intact, but that it is able to harness the criticism that should be directed towards it to strengthen itself through calls for increased regulation (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2009: 18). After all, regulation and competition can be seen as "two sides of the same coin": regulation provides the comparative data by which competition can be conducted. This is one way that the neoliberal project in education sustains the illusion that it contains the common-sense organising principles in secondary education by which social justice can be achieved despite it relying on inequality of outcome to stimulate the markets in the continuance of its project.

The findings also point to teachers in the arts being particularly vulnerable to - and therefore likely to adopt - such individualist behaviours. Arts subjects in secondary schools can be seen to be under attack from aggressive neoliberal policies and specifically targeted for marginalisation (Connell, 2013). The subjectivity and collaboration required by the arts do not render them easily measurable and therefore they become a "thorn in the side" of the neoliberal project in education. More than this, it could be argued that art-based pedagogies are recognised by the neoliberal project as a threat, due to their prioritisation of creative and critical thought, qualities that are considered a threat to the dominant neoliberal vision of society, that is a citizenry that contributes unquestioningly to the market economy as workers and consumers (Easton & Neelands, 2015).

Finally, the research findings suggest that the neoliberal project in education, despite its claim that unquantifiable human processes are a hurdle to democratic



relations, relies on provoking negative personal feelings to regulate teacher behaviour. Beyond the fear that Ball (2003) and Stevenson and Wood (2013) report, and that fuels the desperate acts of self-preservation these findings illuminate, it seems compliance is sustained over time by prompting what might be best described as a developing sense of shame in teachers. Teacher-participants in this study experience shame as a consequence of the growing number of moral and ethical concessions they make in order to remain socially viable in the neoliberal school. Their reflexive capacities are rendered progressively impotent as a result; they believe they have relinquished their right to criticise a professional identity that they - albeit reluctantly - endorse through its performance. To put it another way, critically minded teachers, positioned as agents of a system they simultaneously resist, believe that their opinions hold little legitimacy. The effect of this appears to be cumulative, with the teacher-participants in this study struggling to see beyond what they recognise as their growing ethical deficit. Ultimately, this can be recognised as a form of tyranny-of-the-self.

Before going on to discuss the possible implications of these findings, I feel it necessary to return to a point I made earlier in relation to teachers' identity dissonance (Warin et al, 2006). At the heart of this thesis is the belief that the working through of different conceptions of professional-self - that is, the balancing or calibration of different perspectives - is an important, critically reflexive manoeuvre for the teacher-subject that can lead to improved practice in the performance of their professional identity. The impetus for this enquiry was the recognition that the neoliberal project in education appears to be co-opting this process; my colleagues' and my own capacity for agency with regards to the performance of our professional identity appeared to be significantly diminished as a consequence of the imposition of reflexively debilitating apparatus. I am not advocating teachers become the sole arbiters of their profession;

such autonomy could potentially lead to a politically bias curricular for example, but rather I am advocating a return to a critically balanced approach. It is important to note that the teacher effectiveness research movement, that I have argued supports the neoliberal project in education, has led to improvements in my own practice. There is a difference between compromise and concession however: if I *compromise* I move towards a better teacher-self in a healthy and democratic manner; if I *concede* - which implies muted resistance - good practice is undermined because the values underpinning professional decisions are accepted uncritically towards a “one best way”.

## **6 In lieu of a conclusion**

### ***6.1 Introduction***

I do not really want to “round off” this thesis, as to do so might suggest that there is nothing left to say with regards to the topics I have only touched upon when there is so much more to be discussed.

By adopting a poststructural perspective to subject formation in this critical enquiry, specifically the troubling of the teacher-subject as non-unified (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000), I have been able to illuminate some of the techniques and effects of power that secure teacher compliance at the level of the subject.

Positioned as it is on margins of official discourse, gossip is a site where teachers reveal uncertainty with regards to the professional identity they are expected to perform. To return to Foucault’s (1997: 297) thinking, they use gossip as a discursive tool to play ‘games of truth’ and think otherwise about prevailing norms.

Storying the gossip-data allowed for the use of literary devices, for example ‘unreliable narrator’, to contain and communicate the contrary views and sometimes conflicting values of the teacher-subject in process. Also, crucially, the story form facilitated an exploration, through the employment of expressive literary techniques, of how emotions are relationally produced to secure compliance on the level of the teacher-subject.

What became apparent through an analysis of the storied data is that neoliberal logic can be seen to work *through* the teacher-participants in this study in particularly insidious ways. Caught up in the logic of competition, their agency is orientated towards defending their ‘capital’ as a result of others looking to secure power - and command privilege - at their expense. Further to this, beyond the fear (Ball, 2003; Stevenson & Wood, 2013) that fuels the desperate “out-of-character” acts of self-preservation the

findings illuminate, compliance is sustained over time by prompting a developing sense of shame in teachers. Teacher-participants in this study experience shame because of the growing number of ethical concessions they make to remain socially viable in the neoliberal school.

In this final chapter I go on to consider the implications of these findings. I propose that teachers might benefit from positioning themselves as teacher-researchers to legitimise the concerns raised by the self-work that is currently consigned to covert conversation in the English secondary school.

To this end, I hold my enquiry up as a necessarily “messy” example of how this might be achieved. I do not mean to suggest it is a singular ideological vision to be adhered to (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000: 3), rather I intend to emphasise the need for constant complexity and interrogation of critical research practice in education; a repost to “‘the one best way’ agenda’ (Lather, 1992: 96) that the neoliberal project in education so successfully peddles (Burnard & White, 2008; Hunt, 2006; Stern, 2012).

## ***6.2 Methodological implications***

I first turn my attention to the implications of the findings on critical teacher identity research.

### ***6.2.1 Local accounts of teacher-subject formation***

The critical literature related to the neoliberal project in education focuses largely on ideological exposure. In order to destabilise the project and reveal its undemocratic subtends, further local studies are required to develop a more detailed understanding of the discursive positioning of the teachers by identifying and analysing how specific techniques and effects of power work through them as subjects to secure compliance.

Beyond highlighting the democratic deficit in our schools as a result of the infiltration of the neoliberal, and the broader structural arrangements that incentivise teachers to perform as its agents, ideological exposure in and of itself has limited transformative potential. Local inquiries can build on ideological understandings and inform teachers by what precise techniques and effects of power they are produced as neoliberal teacher-subjects, therefore enabling them to better evade or subvert them.

#### *6.2.2 Putting poststructuralism to work in teacher identity research*

I advocate the “troubling” benefits of putting poststructuralism to work in critical education research as a resistive response to the tightening hold neoliberalism has on qualitative enquiry (Lather, 2013). Adopting a poststructural perspective in this enquiry has highlighted for me ‘the productive possibilities for qualitative research when voice is examined ‘not as pure and full but as a failure’ (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009: 9). Through their “not-to-be-taken-seriously” throwaway conversation, teachers in the study were able to - to a degree - circumnavigate the shame they experienced as a consequence of compromising their values in the process of subject formation. Located as it is in the margins of official discourse, teachers felt liberated to critique neoliberal teacher practice norms more openly, including the ethical frustrations and compromises they and others had experienced as a consequence of *failing* to resist the dominant neoliberal conception of teacher identity. The story form demonstrated its utility in making sense of processes of subjectivation, not least because it can house uncertainty. Through the employment of literary expressive devices, a story can locate the constitution of the subject in relation to the constant, dynamic interplay between compliance and resistance towards discourse (Foucault, 1990), and the confused and often contradictory thoughts and feelings this engenders.

I do not present this as a solution to the problem of voice in educational qualitative enquiry. Rather I hope to make it clear that this enquiry is an attempt to usefully work the *failings* of teacher voice in qualitative enquiry to better understand the discursive and material relations that shape it (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). The suggestion here is that, if educational enquiries are to provide a counter-discourse to the homogeny of the neoliberal project in education, they need to push against the limits of the known (Lather, 2009: 23) to disrupt the “one best way” approach (Lather, 1992: 96) (that has so successfully been harnessed by and to the project (Cohen et al., 2009; Peters & Burbules, 2004).

### *6.2.3 Recognising emotion as valuable data*

The neoliberal project in education denies affect by placing it outside of what is recognised as the “truth” of teaching and learning and how to ascertain it, however these findings suggest that it relies on provoking feelings of fear and shame to incentivise individuals towards maintaining the social status quo. It therefore places the (research) tools teachers might use to better understand how their conduct is regulated out of their reach. Poststructuralism can be put to work in enquiry to highlight how the neoliberal project in education is a pervasive *and persuasive* discourse rather than the natural, ahistorical “truth” it pertains to be, and that it has secured its dominance by looking to ensure that conversations in and about education are held on its terms. I use the word “conversation” here in the broadest sense to refer to not simply the language resources the neoliberal project in education makes available to teachers, but the relationship between power and knowledge that decides what is and what is not “sayable” and by whom within the neoliberal secondary school. This poststructural perspective facilitates teachers to look beyond what is recognised as legitimate data within the neoliberal

project in education. Crucially, this includes affect; it allows them to enquire into how ‘particular meanings are made more powerful than others through their relationship with personal investments, desires and needs’ (Bevir, 1999: 55).

Utilising expressive literary devices in the storying of the gossip-data allowed for (crucially, balanced by distancing devices in order not to discourage the research-audience from empathising with the protagonists to the exclusion of critically).

### ***6.3 Teachers as researchers***

Rather than continue to commit energy to protecting their capital in the ways in which these findings highlight, one potential answer for teachers resistant to the neoliberal teacher identity they are expected to perform is to recognise and engage in (post)critical research themselves as a political act of empowerment.

The suggestion that teachers engage with research to reflect on their positionality and practice towards empowerment is not new. Giroux (2010), writing in response to the rise of the neoliberal project in education in the 1980s and the delimiting impact he observed that this was having on teachers, encourages teachers to recognise themselves as ‘transformative intellectuals’ and engage in ‘a self-critique regarding the nature and purpose of teacher preparation, in-service teacher programmes, and the dominant forms of classroom teaching’ (35). More recently, Winch et al (2015) discuss the need for a broader conception of teacher knowledge. Alongside intuitive knowledge and technical knowhow (the latter of which I have argued the neoliberal project in education has successfully prioritised to the exclusion of all other conceptions of teacher knowledge), they advocate that teachers should be encouraged and supported throughout their careers to develop critical knowledge by engaging with education research. Drawing on the work of Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Elliott (1991), they

argue teachers need to ‘undertake systematic enquiry into their own practice’ (ibid: 206), including ‘the assumptions and values that underpin it’ (ibid).

Where perhaps my call for teachers to engage with educational research differs from those I have highlighted, is in the poststructural orientation I suggest will be required of teacher scholars (Boyer, 1990) if they are to avoid evidencing orthodoxy. Identifying for analysis through what techniques and effects of power the neoliberal project in education incentivises them to contribute to the antidemocratic practice that subtend it, will involve teacher-researchers acknowledging their part in the propagation of the neoliberal project by admitting to their epistemological vulnerability (Archer 2000: 2) and the ethical compromises they have made as a result. These admissions are the data I suggest needs to be engaged with in order to illuminate oppressive power that works *through* a teacher-subject to produce them. As Zembylas (2003) advocates, if teachers come to recognise their contingency they can ‘move beyond dogmatic conceptions of identity that delimit their potential responses to their social positioning’ (109).

Writing of themselves as autonomous change agents in their enquiries (through the composition of ‘victory narratives’ (Pillow, 2003), or, conversely, abdicating responsibility for their actions by taking a determinist stance and blaming the institutional culture where they work for their professional formation, reduces teachers’ capacity for critical reflexivity, inadvertently bolstering the neoliberal liberal project in education through passive acceptance in spite of their academic endeavor. I suggest that by contextualizing their practice in relation to the neoliberal project in education, and, in particular, enquiring into how it incentivises them to perform in particular ways, teachers might be able to move beyond the neoliberal project’s use of shame as a regulating function; they can alleviate the degree to which they take personal



responsibility for systemic failings but without lurching to the opposite, reductive position of dismissing their role as an agent of the system they seek to critique.

However, conceiving and writing of the neoliberal project in education and teacher identity as mutually constitutive is uncomfortable work for the teacher-researcher resistant to the former. The (post)critical embrace of failure in this way - as a tool by which to destabilise the neoliberal project in education - is not without its risks. Methods by which teachers' "chalk-face" accounts can be engaged with ethically without reducing their efficacy need to be given careful consideration. By this, I mean that teachers will need to think creatively with regards to how to design enquiries that are a "safe" space for admissions of practice that do not jeopardise their social viability.

There is currently limited space and time for teachers to reflect on their subjective struggle. Connecting schools to universities open to engaging with (post)critical research into the impact of neoliberalism in education is crucial. This collaboration could inform ongoing professional development as part of INSET provision in schools, for example. It would mark an important progressive step toward redressing the balance toward schooling for social justice rather than schooling for advantage (or "profit").

### ***6.5 Overall Summary***

This enquiry has highlighted specific techniques and effects of power by which the neoliberal project in education produces state secondary school teachers to act as its agents. Neoliberal logic can be seen to work through the teacher-participants in this study in particularly insidious ways. Caught up in the logic of competition, their agency is orientated towards defending their 'capital' as a result of others looking to secure power - and command privilege - at their expense.

The research findings also suggest that the neoliberal project in education, despite its claim that unquantifiable human processes are a hurdle to democratic relations, relies on provoking negative personal feelings to regulate teacher practice and behaviour. One of the chief ways in which compliance appears to be secured in teachers over time is by prompting what might be best described as a developing sense of shame in response to the growing number of moral and ethical concessions they are required to make in order to remain socially viable in the neoliberal school. Teachers come to believe they have relinquished their right to criticise a professional identity that they - albeit reluctantly - endorse through its performance. Moreover, it has revealed the project is ready to sacrifice individual teachers (directly through disciplinary apparatus, or indirectly through voluntary redundancy or illness) for the socially unjust practices it incentivises them to perform in order to deflect criticism from itself. Not only does this mean that, on the face of it, the neoliberal project in education's professed egalitarian aims remain untarnished and intact, but that it is able to harness the criticism that should be directed towards it in order to strengthen itself through calls for increased regulation.

Finally, what has emerged from this study is that the arts disciplines in the English state secondary school are targeted for marginalisation by aggressive neoliberal policies. The subjectivity required by the arts do not render them easily measurable for the purposes of delineating "winners" from "losers" according to the logic of competition at work in the education marketplace. Moreover, arts-based pedagogies encourage creative and critical thought in students, qualities that are considered a threat to the dominant neoliberal vision of a society made up of citizens that contributes unquestioningly to the market economy as workers and consumers (towards unfettered market rule).

If teachers recognise that their pedagogy is not motivated towards creating a more equitable world it is their ethical imperative to empower themselves to change it. As the neoliberal project in education is first and foremost a political ideology, I therefore advocate that, in order to contribute to an effective critical counterproject, teachers will need to politicise themselves. To this end, I suggest teachers engage with (post)critical educational research as a form of political action, identifying for analysis through what techniques and effects of power the neoliberal project in education incentivises them to contribute to the antidemocratic practice that subtend it, with a view to evading or subverting them. By taking such local measures, teachers can contribute to a broader challenge to the neoliberal project in education through its destabilisation: highlighting its hollow egalitarian promises in order to facilitate alternative - and more equitable social relations - to emerge in, between and beyond our secondary school classrooms.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Two example pages from my field journal

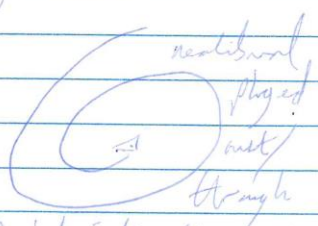
September 2016

SEPT CONT.	<p>Almost forgot = QT</p> <p>"Remind from classroom" / "Nothing better to worry about" / "Promoted out of role" / "Valuable" / "Play the game" / "Why doesn't he/she visit in person?" / Set on desk: agreement / "Lost an eye contact..."</p>	<p>Why SLT?</p> <p>Not marginal = indicators of national policy? From to sit it is?</p> <p>National impact on relations tips (contributes to or limits prof. identity shape?)</p>
Social conversation between teachers.	<p>"He/she has been telling his/her entire group to select a 'real' subject" / Tired with sadness - not angry</p>	<p>Teachers joined against one another to win</p> <p>strategies in best of two process</p>
	<p>HER EYES ROLLED AND HER mouth</p>	
End of meeting: angry / Struggles.	<p>Almost forgot = SLT</p> <p>"There is no budget for that this year..."</p> <p>Looks nervously around (afraid to critique? He seems to be involved in gossip - event?)</p>	<p>Looking to preserve in the face of economic reductionism but setting precedent - that it's possible - another e.g. of undermining resistance.</p>
Capitally end of day	<p>SOLITARY SOLITARIETY</p> <p>"Appearances are important"</p> <p>"He/she has an interview" / "He/she struggles in the classroom" / "... doesn't like children" / Resigned shake of the head</p>	<p>CACOTACTIC?</p>
Resistant duty	<p>"? spoken to for shouting at a student" / "Is that when she is absent / ill?"</p>	<p>Commodification of individuals?? (PETERS)</p> <p>Mental health / resilience</p>



June 2017

JUNE CONT.

Office - first thing in am	"How much help is - too much help?" Absent target = NRT Coffee rings Post-it notes "What about pedagogy?" / "he/she has done what to me CPD."	jealousy? Executive intuition (Wick 2014) Shallowing of pedagogy / pedagogical essence.
Before a meeting	Absent target = HOP He/she is responsible for the department's demise. SYMPATHETIC BUT RELIEVED. Dislike towards others + self; a curl of the lip. A shake of the head. Uncomfortable in their "own" skin.	Competition → out of character behaviour Pressure to perform Blame culture? Extending advantage despite intentions.
Breaktime lunch school lunch	"In every class there are/must be sacrificed hands..."	 Social interactions at all levels... (DAVIES 2009)
End of am assembly	Absent target = NRT "He/she makes sure everything he/she does is noticed by SLT. Not worth it why keep a classroom sweeter to yourself when you can build an assembly around it!" Sarcasm infused.	Bodies come together while others pull apart Scrambling over one another